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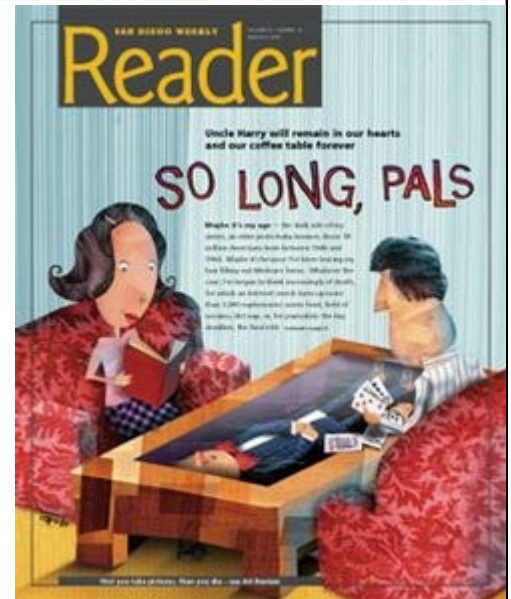
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A nonprofit, nonsectarian association dedicated to a consumer's right to choose meaningful after-death arrangements without emotional or financial exploitation.



San Diego Weekly Reader Published the article, So Long Pals, in its March 6, 2008, issue. It contains a lot of great information of the San Diego Memorial Society and the article profiles a couple of the Society's participating mortuaries.

The article is quite long. To facilitate convenient access to the content of the article you may click on the links below to move directly to various sections of the expose.



**So Long Pals**

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### So Long, Pals

By [Stephen Dobyms](#) | Published Wednesday, March 5, 2008

Maybe it's my age — the dark side of my sixties, an elder proto-baby boomer, those 78 million Americans born between 1946 and 1964. Maybe it's because I've been tearing my hair filling out Medicare forms. Whatever the case, I've begun to think increasingly of death, for which an Internet search turns up more than 1,000 euphemisms: worm food, field of screams, dirt nap, or, for journalists: the big deadline, the final edit.

To put it another way: the boomers have begun to go bang. Eight million have died already. In fact, in January, 1700 were dying every 24 hours, according to the Baby Boomer Death Counter ([boomerdeathcounter.com](#)). So long, pals.

Of course, Americans in general are dying all the time: 700,000 yearly from heart attacks, 600,000 from cancer, 150,000 from strokes, 125,000 from respiratory diseases — more than 2,500,000 in all. But the boomers, I've always thought of them as young. After all, they're practically my generation. As young people we shared the same music, the same movies. Now we're moving to adult communities, assisted living facilities, old folks' homes. Some are signing up for pre-need burial plans; some are measuring themselves for caskets. Or they may be found staring out at the ocean with melancholy expressions, their toes almost touching the surf. That restless water, is that where their ashes will be sprinkled?

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So it was with a mixture of dread and curiosity that in November I drove to Westfield University Towne Centre on La Jolla Village Drive to check out *Bodies The Exhibition*, including 21 full-body specimens, with the same fervor that a movie might promise Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie. Having opened in early May, the exhibition continued till the end of January: seven days a week, for your viewing pleasure. The exhibition's website ([bodiestheexhibition.com](#))

currently lists 14 different *Bodies* exhibitions, which adds up to 294 full-body specimens and in Atlanta, the same folks who brought us the *Titanic* exhibits.

At least half a dozen other companies also exhibit bodies, but the main one is *Body Worlds*, which organized the first of such exhibits in Tokyo in 1995 and is still going strong, more than 3640 organs. The exhibitions are operated by Premier Exhibitions Inc. having had exhibits visited by more than 25 million people in 45 cities in North America, Europe, and Asia. Compared to *Body Worlds*, *Bodies...The Exhibition* is rather small potatoes, having been visited by only about 4 million.

*Body Worlds* was developed and promoted by Dr. Gunther von Hagens, formerly a pathologist at the University of Heidelberg's anatomy and pathology department. In 1977 Dr. von Hagens invented the process that he called Plastination.

"In Plastination," writes Dr. von Hagens on his website *bodyworlds.com*, "bodily fluids and soluble fats are extracted from a specimen, and replaced through vacuum-forced impregnation with reactive resins and elastomers, such as silicon rubber. After posing of the specimen for optimal teaching value, it is cured with light, heat, or certain gases which gives it rigidity and permanence." In a plastinated specimen, every bodily smidgen can be put on view from the glossy red net of the circulatory system, to the entire body thinly sliced from top to bottom like a pound of Swiss cheese, to the skinned body showing off its muscular system, the respiratory system, the digestive system, whatever. This hardly describes the anatomical landscapes presented for your viewing pleasure, and not simply yours, but your children's, your grandchildren's and great-grandchildren's, because these things last forever, or at least until the world goes kaput.

The issue of "optimal teaching value" might be open to question. One of my favorite of von Hagens's figures is a plastinated horse reared up on faux Scottish heath and nicely filleted to show off its insides, while on its back perches a rambunctious bareback rider similarly filleted and split from top to bottom to bring to view his inner and outer qualities. Behind them is a backdrop showing Loch Lomond or perhaps Loch Ness with a mountain rising above it, for this is Scotland and the figure is called the "Highlander."

In an autobiographical statement on the website, Dr. von Hagens described his moment of discovery. He had been slicing up human kidneys for a research project and was having difficulties getting a clean cut. "Then one day, I was in the butcher shop in the university town where I was studying, and as I watched the saleswoman slice ham, it dawned on me that I ought to be using a meat slicer for cutting kidneys. And so a 'rotary blade cutter,' as I called it in the project-appropriation request, became my first Plastination investment."

He had his first "presentable sample" not long afterward. "That was on January 10, 1977, the

day that I decided to make Plastination the focus of my life.” The next year he formed Biodur Products, which sells equipment and materials for anyone interested in doing Plastination on their own. In 1983, he plastinated the heel bone of St. Hildegard of Bingen (1090–1179) at the request of the Catholic Church. His offer to plastinate Pope John Paul II was dropped after becoming bogged down in controversy. In 2001 he opened a plastinating factory, Von Hagens Dalian Plastination Ltd., in Dalian, China, a city of more than six million people.

In Germany, Dr. von Hagens opened the Institute of Plastination in Heidelberg in 1993; his 27,000-square-foot museum, the Plastinarium, opened in the city of Guben in 2006. His website claims there are more than 400 Plastination laboratories in 40 countries “preparing specimens for academic study.” He also solicits body donors, and so far more than 8000 people, including more than 100 Britons, have willed their bodies to the Institute of Plastination. Over 400 have already died, and some, no doubt, have been put on display for their loved ones to admire.

Born in Sieniawa Zarska, Poland, in 1945, the son of a former SS officer and Nazi official, Dr. von Hagens originally had the surname Liebchen, which means “sweetheart.” This he gave up when he married his first wife, Dr. Cornelia von Hagens, and took her surname; the “von” suggests nobility. In 2005, Dr. von Hagens tried to purchase an abandoned factory in his hometown to be used to plastinate bodies, a “cathedral of science,” he said, with “a dissection table as its altar.” He hired his 88-year-old father, Gerhard Liebchen, to run the operation, but the Polish government vetoed the idea, citing the inappropriateness of employing a former SS officer, who had been active in subduing Poles during the Nazi occupation, to run a body factory. The doctor then fired his father, saying he had known nothing about his father’s war experiences.

Dr. von Hagens is tall and cadaverous-looking, a hemophiliac who seemingly never appears in public without his signature black fedora. This he also wears during his public autopsies, the most controversial being held in an art gallery in London in November 2002. Despite police threats to arrest the doctor, the show proceeded before a sellout crowd of 500 as giant screens on the gallery walls made plain each stroke of the knife. It was the first public autopsy in England in 170 years. After cutting through the chest of the 72-year-old male cadaver, Dr. von Hagens reached inside and pulled out a great handful of innards, declaring, “I have liberated the lungs and the heart.” People in the first rows covered their noses because of the smell. When the autopsy was shown on nationwide television several days later, the network received nearly 200 telephone calls of protest from men and women who had accidentally tuned in.

Although the doctor’s exhibits are certainly educational, he displays an unusual sense of humor. A *Body Worlds* exhibition in Hamburg was held in the former Erotic Art Museum in the Reeperbahn, the city’s red-light district, to which Dr. von Hagens invited prostitutes and cab drivers to attend for free. One of the full-body figures, called “Early Bird,” displayed a man with an erection. The doctor said, “That’s something that

every healthy man can relate to, and it's happened to all of us in the mornings and occasionally in the evenings."

Most plastinated bodies used in Dr. von Hagens's exhibits and sold to colleges and universities are created at what he calls his "Chinese manufacturing facility" in Dalian, a large compound of well-guarded and unmarked buildings surrounded by a rusted metal fence. In 1996 he became visiting professor at Dalian University and helped to begin its Plastination program. Many employees at his factory are or have been medical students from the university. Dr. von Hagens is also director of a Plastination research center at the State Medical Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

The doctor's factory employs about 300 people who prepare about 800 bodies at any given time. It takes four to six months to plastinate a body, or up to 1500 hours, though some of that time is spent soaking and curing the body. A Chinese reporter for redOrbit described bodies on tables "surrounded by 'dissectors,' many of them medical students...hunched over the bodies, picking out fat and tissue with tweezers." A *New York Times* reporter wrote about the final stage of preparation in "the positioning room where about 50 medical school graduates clean the bodies and pose them in lifelike positions for the traveling exhibitions." The factory also produces books, DVDs, and stuffed toys with flaps that open to show the organs within. Animals are also plastinated at the factory, from rabbits all the way up to an elephant.

Although Dr. von Hagens has been accused of using bodies from Chinese prisons, he says that all his bodies have been donated and come from many countries, but he adds, "All the copycat exhibitions are from China, and they all use unclaimed bodies."

Dr. von Hagens's method of Plastination is no longer protected by patents, which has allowed about a dozen other Plastination factories to spring up, mostly in the Dalian area. One of them produces the bodies used in *Bodies ...The Exhibition* and is owned by Dr. Sui Hongjin, a former manager of Dr. von Hagen's factory, whom Dr. von Hagens says he fired for stealing his secrets and setting up his own operation.

Anyone trying to calculate the number of bodies used in the different exhibitions, institutes, laboratories, and museums must be stunned by the possible numbers. Ten thousand? But quite a few bodies must have been discarded during experimentation. Twenty thousand? Even though Dr. von Hagens no longer holds all the patents, he must be a wealthy man. His company, Biodur Products in Heidelberg, run by his second wife, Dr. Angelina Whalley, sells all the chemicals and materials for Plastination. Dr. Whalley, whom Dr. von Hagens married in 1992, is also listed as manager of the Plastination Institute and is business manager and designer of the *Body Worlds* exhibitions. The Biodur Products illustrated 20-page catalog not only has the expected silicone polymers and epoxy resins but

also huge freezers, dehydration containers, and basic Plastination packages with all the equipment necessary for the home hobbyist. The smallest package allows for Plastination “up to the size of a human head.” Dr. von Hagens claims that only when his own Biodur polymers are used can high-level success be achieved. He dismisses the work of all his competitors as “shoddy.”

Entering the lobby of the UTC exhibit was similar to entering any museum or theater, with the gift shop to the right and velvet ropes guiding the curious to the ticket windows. During my life I’ve mostly tried to avoid face-to-face encounters with corpses. In fact, I tend to think of them as bloodless and gray, or splopped with gore, and mushed, gashed, sliced, perforated, or smashed in ways designed to upset my stomach. So I rather dragged my feet. But I needn’t have worried.

These corpses were pink and the very picture of health, without a trace of gore. And they were active — kicking a football, dribbling a basketball. They clearly enjoyed life, and their glass eyeballs were eager and alert. Even without skin, or with windows open to various organs, there was nothing discomfoting about them. They seemed not like dead people but friendly extraterrestrials. They were young, good-looking Asians with nothing cadaverous about them. The exhibit’s various rooms were dimly lit with spotlights that illuminated the dead, while lighted display cases showed individual bits and pieces. And the visitors were fascinated. It was hard not to be. Looking at one of the figures was like seeing myself in a mirror. So that’s what I look like inside, I thought.

The rooms were crowded, and people bumped into one another. Children in particular were mesmerized. Reviews that had compared the exhibits to pornography, arguing that to “gawk” at human remains was immoral, seemed foolish, while the many attempts to ban the exhibits and forbid school field trips seemed excessively timid. Near the exit were half a dozen books of viewer comments in which the word “awesome” figured prominently, along with “fantastic,” “amazing,” “cool,” and all their synonyms. I saw no complaints. “I thought I’d wet my pants,” wrote one person. Henry from the Santa Ana Boxing Club wrote: “I thought it was interesting because of the cool dead bodies. P.S. I want my body in this place when I pass on.” One girl wrote, “I don’t understand the myth about Asians having small wangs, these guys were better hung than my boyfriend.”

I asked a dozen people if they would want to be exhibited like this, and the only man who said no added, “I got too much metal in my body to be put on display.” Clearly this was an eternal afterlife of sorts. Even if their souls went to heaven, their bodies would travel to Topeka, Dallas, and St. Louis — wherever the exhibits were booked.

From this I assumed that Premier Exhibitions must be raking in the dough. The show’s eight months in San Diego were probably visited by more than 40,000 people. At an average of \$25 a head that’s one million bucks, not counting the money from T-shirts and souvenirs. But rent,

insurance, and employees' wages must take a big bite. In January, Premier lowered its sales expectations for 2008, stock dropped to a 52-week low of \$5.60, and the chief financial officer quit. During the year one body exhibition was canceled; others had delayed openings and weaker-than-expected sales. Death, it seems, is an expensive business. Only Dr. von Hagens appears to make a serious profit and remains upbeat. As he said in an interview with a *New York Times* reporter, "I want to be the Mercedes of anatomy, before I am plastinated myself."

So what does this have to do with the baby boomers? The British philosopher Jeremy Bentham, after he died in 1832, had himself stuffed, dressed in his usual clothes, and topped with a wax head and his favorite hat. His actual head with glass eyes was placed between his feet, but after being stolen several times by students, the head was put into storage. The body, or Auto-Icon, is kept in a wooden cabinet in the main building of University College London and is regularly wheeled into meetings of the college council with its attendance recorded in the minutes: "Jeremy Bentham — present but not voting." This too is physical immortality of a sort, and it reflects a common yearning. Let me say this is now possible.

Corcoran Laboratories in Traverse City, Michigan, already offers physical immortality to the wealthy, and not so wealthy, through Eternal Preservation Incorporated. The owner, Daniel Corcoran, worked, or works, with Dr. Roy Glover of the University of Michigan, medical director for *Bodies ... The Exhibition*. Corcoran has his own form of Plastination, a process developed by Dow Corning that is seemingly cheaper and faster than Dr. von Hagens's. Dr. Glover said it took him 24 hours to plastinate a human heart, while it took Dr. von Hagens at least a week. Although Dr. Glover and Corcoran have sold full bodies and body parts to various school and universities — Corcoran has sold his plastinated frogs and rats to several Michigan high schools — they also had a touring exhibition about a third the size of *Bodies ... The Exhibition*.

The specimens offered on Corcoran's website (*cor-labs.com*) don't seem as polished as those offered by Dr. von Hagens, but they're cheaper — a Volkswagen compared to a Mercedes. And in a March 2000 interview with the *New York Times*, Corcoran said he felt sure that soon some ambitious mortuary scientist would build his own Plastination factory for interested customers.

"There's a gentleman who does mummification somewhere," he said. "He does one a week, at \$60,000 a body. And he's got a backlog. There's enough eccentric people in the world that someone would do quite well with it."

Then, in 2006, Corcoran decided to provide the service himself. He began his company, Eternal Preservation Inc. (EPI), and posted articles on funeral-service websites, such as *funeralwire.com*,

offering funeral homes \$5000 per corpse, which he would plastinate and return. The family of the deceased would then pay Corcoran a handsome sum over and beyond the initial \$5000. The plastinated body could be buried in the usual way, and the family would feel secure in the knowledge that their dear one was protected forever. In addition, according to the notice, "We believe the deceased and/or their loved ones will want to have better and more expensive caskets just for the fact the deceased remain intact forever and they would want the casket to do so too." Corcoran wrote that if ten percent of the U.S.'s annual dead — the number that he supposed "could afford this process with no financial problems whatsoever" — elected to be plastinated, it would bring the funeral industry a yearly sum of nearly \$140,000,000.

I must say I was impressed by the scale of Dan Corcoran's ambition. Right away I called him at EPI to learn more.

"I was really surprised, to be brutally honest. We got letters and contacts from about 300 funeral homes [after the notice on *funeralwire.com*]. We also had quite a few individuals inquiring about this, and we've had quite a few celebrities who've contacted us about being preserved. I can't tell you their names, but you would recognize them."

Nor would it be necessary for a person to be buried in the usual manner. "It's whatever the individual wants," Corcoran told me. "They could do anything with the body. We heard from someone down South that [he'd] built a mausoleum and wanted seven of his family done." The mausoleum would have windows, as would the caskets, so visitors could observe the deceased.

"A lot of people don't want to be eaten by worms and bugs," said Corcoran. "Literally, thousands and thousands have shown an interest."

Although Corcoran's company was working on a body when we spoke — their first, with another waiting to be done — the purpose of the FuneralWire notice had been to discover the degree of existing interest. Having made technical adjustments to the plastinating process, the company had nearly completed a new website that would not only advertise but describe the process in detail and contain a price list. Corcoran hoped the website would be up in a few weeks.

This seems like great news for baby boomers. In 2000, Dr. Glover charged \$13,000 to plastinate a corpse, and while the price has surely gone up, one could probably get the job done for the cost of a medium-sized BMW.

And, as Corcoran said, the plastinated loved one wouldn't need to go in the ground. At one

point, I talked to John Davis, head of the San Diego Memorial Society, who told me this had already been done. "It happened in Texas and we've seen photos. A husband couldn't let go of his wife and had her treated and put into a glass coffin that he used as a coffee table in his living room."

Of course, this is an industry in its infancy, but one can imagine a time when people might choose to keep their plastinated loved ones in the home, arranged in traditional poses: Aunt Betty taking cookies from the oven, Uncle Bob hunched over a crossword puzzle — figures would last forever and only require a little dusting.

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But I had grown interested in other options available to baby boomers who didn't care to wait for Plastination or who would prefer more economical alternatives. This led me to a panel hosted by the Hemlock Society, where four speakers discussed the choices ahead. The Hemlock Society, quoting its website, "is committed to providing information regarding options for dignified death and legalized physician aid to dying." At the Sunday afternoon event at the Joyce Beers Center in Hillcrest, members of the society taught me a definition of the verb "to hasten" that I hadn't known before. For instance, Michigan's Dr. Kavorkian was a "hastener" and assisted in "hastening" the hopeless into the hereafter. Only in Oregon is hastening, or assisted suicide, legal in the United States.

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An audience of about 50, mostly elderly, listened as the speakers, two men and two women, represented the basic options: body donation to California colleges and universities; a basic, dignified, and inexpensive — relatively — funeral package available from the nonprofit San Diego Memorial Society; a combination mortuary and cemetery package for one-stop shopping from El Camino Memorial; and, lastly, the funeral director of a nonprofit corporation that offers traditional in-home funerals and advocates green burials and eco-friendly cemeteries.

Karly Baptiste, from El Camino Memorial, is an attractive, dark-haired young woman whose job title "family service counselor" masks her actual job of saleswoman. Six El Camino Memorials are located in the San Diego area, and all are part of Stewart Enterprises, a pricey, nationwide chain.

The audience, as might be expected from people familiar with the Hemlock Society, was fairly savvy about the funeral business, and they gave Ms. Baptiste a hard time. This might be partially blamed on the best-selling book by Jessica Mitford that appeared in 1963, *The American Way of Death*, which focused on the funeral business, particularly in California, and revealed a long list of doubtful practices. The book led to the passage of laws to benefit the consumer. For instance, it is now possible to go into any funeral home and demand a price list that will reveal the cost of everything from caskets to eye caps — \$15 per gross — those small plastic disks with tiny grippers that keep the eyes of your loved one from popping open during a viewing.

Audience members wanted to know why El Camino's prices were \$1990 for cremation, while the Memorial Society provided cremation with full services, including scattering the ashes at sea, for \$696. Why were the caskets so expensive, the funerals so expensive, why was it necessary to embalm a body, and so on. Ms. Baptiste's answers spoke of the dignity of the process, professionalism, the love and best intentions of the survivors, their chance to create a personalized tribute for the decedent, and Stewart Enterprises' "Simplicity Package." El Camino's Memorial Park or cemetery is broken up into two dozen or so areas with such names as Valor Ridge, Freedom Terrace, Labor Rest Garden, Garden of Eden, Madonna Lawn, Vista of Liberty, Moose Lawn, and the Scatter Garden. I wanted to ask about Moose Lawn, but Ms. Baptiste was having a hard time and I felt it best to leave well enough alone.

According to Wikipedia, the 22,500 U.S. cemeteries yearly bury 30 million board-feet of hardwoods from caskets; 90,272 tons of steel and 2700 tons of copper and bronze, also from caskets; and 14,000 more tons of steel from vaults, which require 1,636,000 tons of reinforced concrete. Also sunk into the ground are 827,060 gallons of embalming fluid, enough to fill eight Olympic-sized swimming pools.

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Next to speak was Herb Hawley, head of the University of California Body Donation Program, who offered a simple solution to rescue this mass of hardwood, steel, concrete, etc.: Give your body to him. Fifty-seven California universities, colleges, and community colleges have bodies donated to them for anatomy classes and research. Unfortunately, last year they received 225 bodies, and they need 500. Only a very small number were unclaimed dead.

One gray-haired lady asked in a quivering voice, "Is an old body useful?"

"We have no age limits on donors," said Hawley. He added that the program had to receive the body within eight days of death. Only the obese and those with hepatitis or HIV were ineligible. Anyone else was fine. There was no charge to the families, and once a school was done with the "study," which might take two or three years, the body would be cremated and the ashes scattered at sea. It was also possible to have organs and tissue harvested — a charming euphemism — before the body went to the Body Donation Program. In addition, the family could have a traditional church or mortuary service with a viewing. "You're helping mankind," he said. "It's a great educational opportunity. I've signed up for it, and I feel I'm making a better world for my grandchildren."

A red-haired woman with an educated voice said that she had donated her brain to one school and her body to another. "Would there be a problem with that?"

Hawley said it would be no problem. He is a very large man, about six foot six, and solid, with a deep, authoritative voice. He holds a business degree, and his previous body experience had been while he was employed by the San Diego medical examiner's office.

“Some of us are contemplating an arranged death at home,” said the moderator. “Can we still be donors?”

“Yes, but it might require an autopsy,” Hawley said.

“So someone can call you eight days after a death?”

Hawley chuckled. “If someone dies and calls me eight days later, I’ll quit.”

Another man asked, “If someone hastens their death, if we help in a suicide, which we do, well, sometimes, is there a danger for us?”

“It’s illegal as hell,” said Hawley. “Dr. Kevorkian got major time for it, and if he hadn’t been famous he would have gotten life. But as for assisted death, I believe if you can do it for your dog, then you should be able to do it for your mother.”

Next to speak was Barbara Kernan, a registered nurse and licensed funeral director who started Thresholds in 2004 to provide home and family-directed funerals. Attractive and in her mid-40s, she spoke with great compassion, while expressing anger at the funeral business as a whole. “I realized a few years ago that I was going to die, that I was going to check out of here, and it made me look differently at death. Death is like marriage, a rite of passage. But I didn’t like the usual mortuary experience, so I started Thresholds. There’s a shift going on. The traditional mortuary experience has left a bad taste in people’s lives. We’re bringing it back to the family; it’s more hands-on, more of a healing experience. We specialize in in-home funerals. We do not embalm and don’t require embalming for a viewing. We don’t have a traditional mortuary, but there are many places where you could hold a viewing. We do not sell caskets. We work with the family in washing and preparing the body, but because the body has gotten such a bad rap, many people don’t want anything to do with it. But death is the ultimate experience, and a home funeral is very helpful in the grieving process. No one has to have a funeral director. You can be your own funeral director. You can pick up the body from the hospital yourself. The hospital won’t like it, but you can do it. You can transport the body and build your own casket. The whole process is very empowering. Even people who work on the front line of death don’t know their rights. You can even sometimes bury your body on your own property, though it’s legally very difficult.”

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“We makes friends with our families; they invite us to dinner. We companion them through the whole process. And we encourage people to bring their children into the process. It’s hard and sad, but it’s also life-changing. It’s very healthy and educational. We don’t do embalming for very specific environmental reasons. We don’t usually look at the funeral industry as an environmental polluter, but it is. Also an unembalmed body is much nicer looking, more real looking, than an embalmed one. We also encourage people to witness the cremation. It can be emotionally challenging, but it helps with the grief experience.”

During the question-and-answer period, a woman asked Kernan, “Don’t dead bodies stink if they’re not embalmed?”

“We had a young woman at home for five days over Christmas without smelling. And she was still like an angel after those five days. A cause of death like liver cancer can cause an odor, but most people are okay for five days. And we’ll use dry ice, but we’ll place it so you can’t see it. I was once told by morticians that the body would explode and all sorts of horrible things if it weren’t embalmed, but that’s totally not true.”

As an advocate of green burials and eco-cemeteries, Kernan believes that it’s best for the unembalmed body to be buried in a biodegradable container, or with just a plain shroud, in a natural area more resembling a park or nature preserve than a cemetery. Sorry to say, no such places exist in Southern California. The closest is Fernwood Cemetery, outside of Mill Valley, a 19th-century cemetery bought by Forever Enterprises in 2004 which began green burials at that time. The first green cemetery in the United States was the Ramsey Creek preserve that opened in 1998 outside Westminster, North Carolina. Their cost for a green burial is about \$2000. It’s owned by Memorial Ecosystems, which operates another property, Honey Creek Woodlands, about 30 miles east of Atlanta. So far, only eight eco-cemeteries exist in the U.S., though others are planned. Great Britain, on the other hand, has at least two dozen. Particulars about green burials can be obtained from the Green Burial Council, [greenburialcouncil.org](http://greenburialcouncil.org).

Local laws requiring the use of burial vaults are the main reason for so few eco-cemeteries. Supposedly, a burial vault — all that steel and reinforced concrete — protects the land from sinking as the casket decomposes, and it protects the groundwater from contaminants. New England, where I live, is full of cemeteries with early–20th-century and 19th-century graves where no burial vaults were used, and one finds no evidence of sinkage. Nor is contamination an issue, studies in Great Britain suggest, unless the body is buried on the bank of a stream or river. Studies indicate there is far more pollution in conventional cemeteries, not just because of the buried chemicals, metals, and concrete, but because of the fertilizer, chemicals, and water used to keep the cemeteries green. Nor do burial vaults, embalming, and steel caskets ensure against decomposition. The only way to protect against body rot is Plastination. The big reason for burial vaults is that they make money for cemeteries.

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The fourth person to speak was John Davis, executive director of the San Diego Memorial Society, which has enrolled more than 30,000 members since its founding in 1958. It is the only nonprofit, volunteer-led funeral society in San Diego County, and Davis is the only paid employee. His position is considered half-time, though he says it keeps him busy about 60 hours a week. The Memorial Society is affiliated with Funeral Consumers Alliance ([funerals.org](http://funerals.org)), a national organization that “gives advice and guidance to local memorial and funeral-planning societies.” The benefits of a memorial society are pre-funeral planning and price — the society negotiates with participating

mortuaries “to provide services for members at preestablished prices.” Funeral packages from nonparticipating mortuaries can range from \$3000 to \$13,000, while additional services and pricey caskets can more than double the cost. This doesn’t include cemetery charges. Memorial Society prices range from about \$500 to \$1700, with cemetery charges being extra, as are the cost of permits, licenses, and taxes. Cremation packages from nonparticipating mortuaries can range from \$2000 to \$8000, while the Memorial Society prices run from \$500 to \$700. The society has about 7500 members of all ages with the oldest being 108. The membership fee is \$40.

The Memorial Society’s prices may indicate why it’s unpopular with the local funeral industry. Of the 56 licensed mortuaries in San Diego County, only 6 are willing to meet the Memorial Society’s criteria. Of the roughly 5000 monthly mortuary totals in the county, the Memorial Society handles about 40. This disparity is no indication of the quality of the Memorial Society’s cremation and burial plans but points to advertising and the extra services offered by most other mortuaries.

John Davis has been executive director since August 2006, though he has been on the board of the Memorial Society for over ten years. At 58, he has short gray hair and a closely trimmed gray beard. He wears rimless glasses, and his small ears are set so close to his head they appear to be hiding. Previously, he held positions in the financial-services industry. He described the function of the Memorial Society and discussed the high prices of the nonparticipating mortuaries. “The reason embalming is so popular in this country is that it makes it possible for funeral homes to make a lot of money. In most other countries, embalming is a lot less common, even rare.” Muslims forbid embalming, and it is generally forbidden under Jewish law. Some branches of the Eastern Orthodox Church also forbid embalming. Embalming began to be widely used in the United States during the Civil War as a way to preserve and ship home members of the military who had died of wounds or sickness.

I spoke again with Davis several days later over lunch at Hob Nob Hill on First Avenue, where he described the current state of the funeral industry more specifically.

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“The mom-and-pop mortuaries are being sucked up by the multinational companies,” he told me. “One of the biggest that makes its presence felt in San Diego is Service Corporation International.” There are more than 20 SCI establishments in the San Diego area, including Glen Abbey Memorial Park & Mortuary, one of the largest and most expensive funeral companies in the country.

SCI’s website — *sci-corp.com* — states that in 1999, “The company’s global network numbered more than 4500 funeral service locations, cemeteries, and crematories in 20 countries.” This number was greatly increased in November 2006, when SCI acquired the Alderwoods Group for \$1.2 billion. Alderwoods had been the second-largest provider of funeral, cremation, and cemetery services with 579 funeral homes, 72 cemeteries,

and 61 combination funeral homes and cemeteries in the U.S., Canada, and Puerto Rico. The third- (now second-, after the acquisition of Alderwoods) largest company is Stewart Enterprises. Alderwoods owns Rose Hills Memorial Park & Mortuary in Whittier, the largest cemetery in the world with 2500 acres and more than 600 employees. Turning the many steep hillsides, cliffs, and canyons into rolling hills required moving 25 million cubic yards of earth in a project one-sixth the size of the building of the Panama Canal. The vastness of this enterprise gives one a sense of the profits available to the funeral industry.

SCI was founded in Houston in 1962 by Robert Waltrip, who remains chairman of the board. He is a friend of George W. Bush, as well as a big-money contributor to Bush's political campaigns. Both Waltrip and Bush, while the latter was still governor of Texas, were involved in a scandal, where Waltrip allegedly got Bush to fire a director with the Texas Funeral Service Commission for pursuing SCI's violations of state embalming codes. Although Waltrip and Bush denied they had acted improperly, the case was settled out of court with SCI and the State of Texas jointly paying \$200,000, while SCI paid an additional \$21,000 in fines to the state funeral commission.

John Davis told me that the San Diego Memorial Society would not work with an SCI mortuary, nor would the company work with him. "We don't want to work with a company we see as gouging the public. If someone wants an expensive funeral, that's fine; but poor people are talked out of money that is needed by their families." Davis said that a mortuary salesman would make his pitch when someone "was at their most vulnerable" and would try to convince the prospective buyer that issues of love, respect, and prestige would be reflected by the amount of money the customer paid for the funeral. "Much of this would be avoided with preplanning and living wills, but people are so afraid of death that they don't do it.

"SCI tries to buy up enough mortuaries in a community to give them an effective monopoly, and then they raise their prices through the roof." He said that SCI also had a no-walk policy and, if forced to, would match or undercut other mortuaries' prices in an attempt to drive them out of business.

"We still have a lot of family-owned mortuaries in the county, and they hate the conglomerates as much as we do. We sue SCI all the time and mostly win. The Funeral Consumers Alliance is suing them right now for price-fixing on their caskets and other stuff. Once SCI and the conglomerates set up their monopolies, they can control prices. After all, management serves the shareholders, and profits run about 25 percent." An edifying source for funeral industry shenanigans is *funerals-ripoffs.org*.

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Another of Davis's concerns was the theft and illegal trade of body parts. He said a crematory might remove tissue and body parts, and whatever was left would be put into the cremation furnace. Tissue and body parts were also taken from mortuaries. I had heard this from several

other people, but it's difficult to know how much of it goes on. Some people say a lot, some say very little.

In a case in 2003, Michael Brown, owner of the Pacific Care Crematorium in Lake Elsinore, was sentenced to 20 years in prison after he pleaded guilty to mutilating 78 bodies without permission. The body parts were sold to medical-research companies and universities for a profit of at least \$435,000. These were mostly heads, knees, and spines that he was legally obliged to cremate between February 2000 and February 2001. Two of Brown's employees received lesser sentences. Prosecutors said the bodies came from Riverside, San Diego, and San Bernardino counties. A number of the San Diego body parts came from SCI mortuaries. The SCI Humphrey Mortuary in Chula Vista, along with Brown's several companies, had to pay \$450,000 in damages to the widow and family of a San Diego man whose body parts Brown intended to sell. The crime was discovered when Riverside County investigators raided Brown's home and business offices and discovered the San Diego man's head, shoulders, and knees. In separate cases, other San Diego families were also awarded large sums stemming from Brown's conviction.

In an ongoing case that broke toward the end of 2005, Michael Mastromarino, an oral surgeon and owner of Biomedical Tissue Services of Fort Lee, New Jersey, was accused of taking the tissue and body parts from hundreds of bodies from funeral homes in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania in what was labeled a corpse-snatching ring. Mastromarino's company then sent the tissue in large coolers to five suppliers across the U.S. Harvested skin is used in many medical procedures. Every year about 20,000 square feet is used for burn victims. A company in Florida, Regeneration Technologies, shipped a total of 19,446 pieces of tissue from Mastromarino's company. One of the bodies belonged to Alistair Cooke, former host of *Masterpiece Theatre*, who died in 2004 at the age of 95. His arms and legs went to Regeneration Technologies, but records are unclear about who received his pelvis and other tissues. At this writing (January 2008), Mastromarino has pleaded guilty to the charges and has promised to provide investigators with information about the companies who received the stolen bits and pieces. In return, he hopes to avoid a lengthy prison sentence, according to the Associated Press. A Google search will turn up other recent cases involving stolen parts and tissue.

For a San Diego baby boomer imagining the future of his body after death, stories of body looting must come as a nasty surprise. Although the vast number of mortuaries may be innocent, the existence of even one crooked mortuary or crematorium plants a seed of doubt. Alistair Cooke, according to his daughter, had a horror of being cut open. Now he is spread across half the country.

Well, how does one protect oneself from such a danger? It was this question that led me back to Barbara Kernan of Thresholds. After all, a home funeral and green burial would keep attention focused on my earthly remains till they were safely in the ground.

I met Kernan and her partner Eric Putt one afternoon in a coffee shop on El Cajon Boulevard. Before Thresholds, Kernan worked as a school nurse and thought of becoming a homeopathic doctor focusing on home-death care. Then, as she said, she was sidetracked into becoming what she called a “death midwife to companion people through the death process.”

Kernan began to take distance-learning classes from Clayton College in Atlanta. One of the first questions she was asked was “Are you prepared for your own death?”

“It changed my life,” Kernan told me. “And I realized there could be a service that could help people through a difficult time. Then, the more I learned, the more misinformation I learned. Like embalming. I had no idea that one didn’t need to be embalmed. And once I found out that people could keep the body and do their own funeral, then I wanted to work with them and help them. We need to return to the rituals and intimacies of a funeral. Meaning has to be brought back into the process.”

She also learned that only four laws govern what happens to the body. 1 — A certificate of death must be signed by a doctor or medical examiner. 2 — A permit must be filed for the final disposition of the body. 3 — There has to be a suitable container for the body — “Which can be anything,” Kernan added. 4 — One has to “interface” with a cemetery or crematorium.

Kernan took other classes, including a workshop in Northern California in washing and preparing bodies, before becoming a licensed mortician. At 45, she is quite pretty, with dark blond hair tied back in a ponytail. The day we met she wore brass-and-bead earrings, a blue shawl, an earth-colored blouse, a long skirt, and no makeup. She and Putt are the only licensed funeral directors in the county who do home funerals. She said San Diego cemeteries don’t allow green burials because they are so inexpensive, while only two cemeteries — Mt. Hope and El Cajon — will let her use a cardboard casket, even with a concrete liner. In-home funerals cost between \$400 and \$2000.

“Many times our customers come to see us as part of the family,” Kernan told me. “People have been disempowered by the conventional funeral process, and we try to empower them. We help them claim responsibility over this major rite of passage. We don’t use what they call restorative arts. We use the least invasive stuff to achieve the same results that the industry tries to achieve. We won’t use eye caps or wire the jaw shut unless the family wants it. We’re controlling the environment in an in-home funeral. We’ll wash the body; we’ll use ice if we need to. People don’t have to have an in-home funeral, but they should know what their options are. Some people will help us dress the body, but most won’t. Some feel that to dress their mom is inappropriate. But often the family will help us carry the body out of the bedroom. Other families have worked right there with us. We’ve had families come and help us clean up bodies after autopsies. They can be messy, but they are what they are. Really, we’re doing what the family wants us to do. We’ve even had people build their own caskets. We had a family — they were carpenters — who built a beautiful casket out of poplar and

mahogany with special handmade wooden handles. The women upholstered the inside of the casket with blue cloth. The casket was so large that it wouldn't fit in the house, so they left it on the porch, and the son picked up his dead mother and carried her to the casket in his arms. It was beautiful. People were weeping. The son placed his mother in the casket, and the kids put flowers around her. It made me realize how beautiful this experience can be. Members of that family still call us. Some families have even invited us to Easter and Thanksgiving dinners."

On the other hand, Thresholds hasn't had as many in-home funerals as Kernan had hoped — only 20 out of about 200. "We've had far more conventional funerals than we ever thought we'd have. The bulk of our work is in direct cremation, with the body going directly to the crematory. Families can witness the cremation if they want to, but most haven't. Death has gotten a bad rap, but it's beginning to come out of the closet."

To educate people about in-home and family-directed funerals, Kernan and Putt offer classes and attend about 20 functions a year — Earth fairs, Alzheimer conferences, holistic healing circles, and environmental conferences. "We go wherever we can get the name out," she said.

The resistance to home funerals has been disappointing. "It's a force outside me. I have moments when I think, 'What the hell am I doing?' But then all I need is a family to thank me, and I think how I wouldn't want to do anything else. In the beginning I was very idealistic, but now, although everything has worked out, I'm not as idealistic as I used to be. I thought people would be knocking down the doors to do this, but that's not what happened. At first I was more intolerant of people who didn't want a hands-on experience, but now I think it's okay."

When I asked about body looting, Eric Putt says it exists in every community in California. "Harvesting is too lucrative, and the temptation is too great. There's a lot of money in body parts and tissue." Putt is 50 with a trimmed beard, ponytail, and rimless glasses. Before beginning Thresholds with Kernan, he spent several years running a first-call service, transferring bodies from homes to mortuaries. "It's tough work. You're on call 24 hours a day with maybe 40 mortuaries calling you. People in the business drive white vans, very industrial looking, but with no windows in the back. Nobody realizes there could be a dead body inside."

I felt he must be exaggerating about body looting, but maybe I'm wrong. Maybe his familiarity with mortuaries gives him more credibility on the subject.

I'd told John Davis and Barbara Kernan I wanted to talk to a local mortician, and both recommended Robert Humphrey, owner of Community Mortuary on Broadway in Chula Vista. Both said that although there were good people in the industry, Humphrey was the man they respected most.

Some confusion exists about Humphrey's Community Mortuary, because about two blocks north is Humphrey Mortuary, which is owned by SCI. Humphrey's father, also a mortician, started his mortuary in 1955 when it was Humphrey's Mortuary, but then he sold it, along with the name, in the 1970s. As a result, people who are looking for Robert Humphrey sometimes wind up going to Humphrey's Mortuary. "There is constant confusion about it," he told me, "and there always will be."

Actually, Humphrey's grandfather started in the business back in the 1890s "in that transition period between when livery stables and hardware stores sold caskets and the funeral homes began," Humphrey said. "I grew up in mortuaries, lived in them all my life. I was shocked when I learned that other kids didn't freeze when the telephone rang." He worked in the mortuary as a teenager and got his embalmer's license — he is now 63. After his father sold the mortuary, Humphrey stayed on as manager but soon left to pursue jobs in banking and then computers. "But I always gravitated back," he said. During those years the mortuary changed hands several times, and then Humphrey bought it in 1999. The San Diego Memorial Society had worked with the Humphrey Mortuary beginning in 1958, but SCI ended the relationship. However, Humphrey's Community Mortuary is one of the six mortuaries used by the Memorial Society.

"To tell you the truth," said Humphrey, "I'd rather have SCI as a competitor up the street than a young, hard-driving professional who did everything right. SCI pays most of their people on commission. Often they were top-notch encyclopedia salesmen the month before. But I know some I respect, and many [of these people] hate what they do. For a while, there was a fierce acquisition phase by SCI. They'd buy a place, slap on a fresh coat of paint, fire everyone and hire kids, double their prices and treat their customers shabbily. But it didn't work, and they had to moderate their tactics. Still, it's a corporation. In my business, my wife and I answer the phones all night, and I do what I have to do. The big places have an answering service, maybe in Canada, who'll tell the caller that the director will get back to him in an hour. Maybe they do, maybe they don't."

Humphrey is bald with a round face and soft voice and was quite distinguished-looking in a dark blue suit. Over the years I've met a number of funeral directors who were a trifle oily, but Humphrey gave the impression of rigorous honesty. He has eight employees and handles about 370 bodies a year. His wife and son also work in the mortuary. It reminded me of the backstretch or stable area of a racetrack: everybody talking quietly and nobody running. But it's a well-appointed and dignified environment, and their prices are less than half of Humphrey's up the street. Direct cremation at Community Mortuary is \$870; at Humphrey's it's \$2200. Caskets range from \$395 to \$5600 at Community and from \$495 to \$13,295 at Humphrey's. Washing the body is \$105 at Community and \$295 at Humphrey's. "Each thing has to be itemized," said Humphrey, "but we can offer packages that are discounted. And what we charge the Memorial Society is even less." Despite these prices, Humphrey's does more than double the business of Community Mortuary.

I asked Robert Humphrey how the funeral business had changed since 1950. "Back then," he said, "all embalmers and funeral directors owned their own businesses. They'd raise prices for the rich and give funerals away to the poor. Now, with these big chains, that's no longer true. And it used to be more emotional back then. Today, you don't see the wailing, screaming, and jumping in the grave. It used to scare the heck out of me. Now people are more reserved. Everything changed when Jessica Mitford published *The American Way of Death*. With that book, the fox was in the henhouse. Mitford was a true crusader. The business ceased to be a good-old-boy network. New laws were passed. That's why a general price list and a casket price list are available by law to everyone. But the biggest change has been cremation. When I started, only about 4 percent were cremated, now it's almost 70 percent. We had to have a chapel, an embalming room, and a casket room. Now companies selling direct cremations need only a storefront. I believe that will just about finish the mortuary business."

I'd recently read of a woman in Illinois who had had her six cats put to sleep and buried with her; I asked both Kernan and Humphrey if they knew of anything like this. They didn't but did mention instances of people being buried with the ashes of pets, and Kernan mentioned a man who was buried with an urn containing his wife's ashes in the crook of his arm. One man was buried with a baseball bat, one with his golf clubs, and another with a practice samurai sword. Many were buried with photographs, both of people and pets. They were also buried with cans of beer, bottles of whisky, joints of marijuana, candy bars, baseball mitts, a mother's purse, beads and feathers, tea bags (I found that particularly odd), coins on the eyes or in the hands — it was a long list.

Lastly, I asked Humphrey about stolen body parts. "I think the possibility of body theft from mortuaries and crematoriums is greatly exaggerated," he said. But he agreed that even one publicized instance puts all them under suspicion.

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I next visited the Humphrey Mortuary up the street. Its website states that it was established in Chula Vista in 1955 but doesn't say that that was an entirely different mortuary and only the name is the same. Humphrey's has been at its present location since 1999. Its lobby gives an immediate impression of opulence and calm. Lights gleam from a huge chandelier. Above a gas fireplace hangs the reproduction of a painting of one of Byrne-Jones's melancholy women. In fact, I saw many reproductions of a melancholy nature. No clowns, no circuses. To the left was the Rose Chapel, seating about 80 people, a handsome and nondenominational space; to the right was the Serenity Chapel, seating more than 170 people and resembling a more traditional church. Beyond the fireplace were a number of viewing rooms, while sweeping upward from my right was an impressive staircase.

I introduced myself to the salesman — called a "family service counselor" — as a prospective customer, because I felt that if I introduced myself as a reporter I might be shown the door. I don't know if this was true, but because of my deception, I'll simply call the family service counselor Mr. Jones. He was polite, soft-spoken, and seemingly straightforward — nothing like

a used-car salesman, which I had come to expect. He led me up the curving staircase to a conference room. The rugs were so thick that an elephant could dance the hokey pokey and not be heard.

Glancing at the mortuary's price list, I said I'd just visited Community Mortuary and wondered why Humphrey's was so much more expensive. Mr. Jones made one of those what-a-silly-question faces and proceeded to tell me the advantages of Humphrey's. Firstly, there was the ambience, the impression of upper-class opulence. Community Mortuary might be dignified and attractive, but it lacked the muted glitz of Humphrey's. Then there was the grief-management library, a 24-hour "Compassion-Helpline," pre-need and pre-planning packages, which enable a person "to lock in a price forever." After some of this, Mr. Jones spoke of the "dignity packages." "Dignity Memorial" is a brand name for SCI and is offered by its 1800 locations. Although Humphrey's also offers a basic no-frills, no-ceremonies funeral — immediate burial with container provided by the purchaser for \$3095 — the effort is to sell the Dignity packages, which range from the Tribute package at \$8295 to the Platinum package at \$11,595. In the latter, the offered stainless-steel and hardwood caskets cost \$2795 all by themselves. Of course, there are more expensive caskets available, all the way up to a solid-mahogany casket for \$13,295. The caskets include small memory-safe drawers located over the decedent's belly for pictures, coins, jewelry, whatever the corpse would like to save. However, the memory corner option is also extra. The memory corner is fixed to a rear corner of the casket and may have military insignias or pay tribute to the decedent's favorite hobby — small images representing a passion for golf, gardening, cooking, fishing, hunting, and so on. In the Tribute package the casket price ranges between \$1200 and \$1400. Cemetery charges are extra.

The top Dignity packages also offer immediate discount bereavement fares from airlines (meaning one doesn't need to wait for a reimbursement), as well as discounted bereavement travel packages for up to four family members for up to a year. There is a child/grandchild protection program that provides a free funeral for any of the decedents' children or grandchildren up to the age of 21 and a number of other services to make the survivors' lives easier. Dignity cremation packages range from \$10,395 down to \$3195. While all the packages might ease the funeral process, they are pricey and include frills like a Dignity Platinum Cross pen set, the Platinum Engraved Crane's acknowledgement cards with envelopes, and an engraved stationery set with envelopes. Listed by themselves on the mortuary's price list, the pen set is \$58, the acknowledgment cards and envelopes are \$159, and the stationery set and envelopes are \$131 — a total of \$348 for pen set and stationery.

I'm sure some baby boomers grow excited to hear of such possibilities, but this particular proto-boomer would prefer the in-home funeral and green burial. When I had asked Robert Humphrey about in-home funerals and green burials, he said, "I could live with that," then added: "Really, the whole thing is up to my family. It's whatever they want."

Another Dignity package service is a form of virtual immortality comparable to the actual immortality offered by Plastination. This is an Everlasting Memorial, or E-Remembrance, a webpage with your picture, biography (up to 10,000 words), and perhaps historical documents, awards, poems, a movie, testimonials from family and friends, recorded messages you might want to leave for survivors, or you can sing "Auld Lang Syne" — whatever you want. And in 500 years, someone can access it from China — if there is a China — and say, "What an odd bloke."

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So these are possibilities available to those of us on the cusp of darkness. Another option — not available in San Diego — is sky burial, at times practiced in Tibet and India. The body is put on a high platform, prayers are chanted, incense is burned, and the body is left to be devoured by vultures. Robert Humphrey had such a client. Since the body had to be shipped, it had to be embalmed. Then the body was put on top of a stone tower. "Given the embalming fluid," Humphrey told me, "those had to be very sick vultures."

I've said little about cremation, but if a boomer wants that option he or she can choose inurnment — a new word for me — and have their urn buried in a cemetery. And in San Diego one can find many companies to scatter one's ashes at sea. Or one's ashes can be mixed with cement, then sunk in the ocean to help form an artificial reef and fish habitat. On the other hand, the Celestis Company offers memorial space flights that will put your ashes into orbit around the earth. Or one's ashes can be shot from a cannon or shotgun, dropped from a helium balloon, sent skyward in fireworks, or scattered from a plane. The company LifeGem will squeeze your ashes into an artificial diamond, and the company Mementos will mix a few smidgens of ash with molten glass to make lovely spheres of about nine inches in diameter with streaks of color and swirling ash. Smaller glass objects can be carried in the pocket. This process is also suitable for pets. And then there are lockets and memorial pendants, music boxes, garden ornaments — whatever you might want done with ashes is most likely available. Your ashes can even be mixed with paint, which is then used to paint your portrait.

The average male produces six pounds of ash; the average female produces four pounds. I expect a wooden casket would add to the weight. The body is incinerated in a retort at between 1400 and 2100 degrees for two hours. The end result is ash and a lot of bone fragments, so the whole business goes into a cremulator with a rotating or grinding mechanism to pulverize the bits and pieces into a sandy substance called cremains. Unavoidably, a few crumbs will remain in the retort or cremulator and be mixed in with the next person. Probably every cremated human being carries with him or her a little bit of someone else.

However, cremation may not be with us long due to concerns about pollutants. Two hours of incineration uses a lot of propane, and cremation releases into the environment nitrogen oxide, carbon monoxide, sulfur dioxide, hydrogen fluoride, hydrogen chloride, mercury, and other gases and heavy metals. About 600 pounds of mercury are released from U.S. crematoriums into the air each year. While this may not seem a lot, the United Nations

Environment Program has listed it as “statistically significant.” The mercury comes from dental fillings. It has been suggested that teeth could be pulled either at the mortuary or crematorium. This idea has had few supporters.

In some areas of Europe cremation is now illegal, while the environmental departments of a number of states, including California, have either begun or plan to begin measuring crematory emissions. Emissions have also been measured by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Measurements by the British environmental protection agency in 1999 indicated that “crematories are the third-largest source of airborne mercury.” The cremation rate in England is 80 percent. According to a 2005 report from the Funeral Ethics Organization based in Hinesburg, Vermont, “The Oslo-Paris Agreement is requiring European crematories to filter out mercury and dioxins...The cost of the filtering system is high (\$500,000), and the equipment takes up a huge amount of space...All newly built crematories will be faced with meeting this challenge.” It is expected that this will put quite a few crematories out of business.

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Enter promession — from the Italian word for “promise” — invented in 1999 by the Swedish biologist Susanne Wiigh-Masak. In this process, the body and coffin are frozen and then dipped in liquid nitrogen, which is at a temperature of -196 degrees centigrade. This makes the body and coffin very brittle. Body and coffin are gently vibrated, reducing them to a white organic powder. The powder is then placed in a vacuum chamber, and the water is evaporated. Lastly, an induced magnetic field removes any metals, including mercury. About 10 to 12 pounds of powder remain, which is put into a small coffin made of cornstarch.

Wiigh-Masak patented her method and formed the company Promessa Organic in 2001. A full-scale facility was ready in Sweden in 2003, and more Prometors, as they are called, have been built or are being built in Great Britain, the Netherlands, Germany, South Africa, and South Korea. More countries are lining up. Meanwhile, promession has become very popular in Sweden. The powder is hygienic, odorless, and won’t decompose unless water is added. The result is a growing number of ecological burials where the small coffin is placed in a shallow grave and a bush, tree, or perennial plant is put above it. Over the next months the coffin and ash decompose, and this nourishes the plant or tree. Sometimes, a little commemorative plaque is placed on the tree, sometimes not. Nothing in the process creates environmental problems, and the liquid nitrogen is saved and used again.

I don’t know if it is possible to buy stock in Promessa Organic, but I’ve got my wallet open. It’s expected that promession will become very popular in the United States. To tell the truth, I’ve always felt a little squeamish about being burned, but the possibility of being turned into a human Popsicle, jiggled to white powder, and then placed to nourish, say, a hungry rhododendron is quite attractive.

So there you have it, boomers. It’s called the future. Soon we can look forward to plastinated

boomers dawdling in the living rooms of their children or used as lawn ornaments — holding a birdhouse or working as a scarecrow. Or, like Alistair Cooke, we can enter the looted-body parts market. Or we can be shot into space or thrown into the sea. Or we can be sliced and diced in the body-donation option. Or we can be turned into a tasty white dust for trees to eat.

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The future, my boomer friends, is yours.