

Earth Day and death: Saving the world long after we're gone

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by [Julia Goralka](#)



Photo: On the banks of the mangroves

CHICAGO, April 19, 2012 — A Chevy Impala stuffed with five adult and near-adult bodies for three hours on Easter Sunday led to some intriguing conversations, one of which was “What to do with Mom when she’s dead?” It was a foregone conclusion that my body would not be rising on the third day to show my loved ones the way to the Light, although there are constant threats that they will be haunted for the rest of their lives if they do not live according to the life plans I have put so much care into providing them.

Their collective response: “Whatever.”

Easter is a holiday that lends itself to discussions of death. In the interest of full disclosure, however, it was Mom herself who brought up this particular topic. The family knows I do not want to take up precious land with a traditional burial. People are going to keep dying forever. Eventually we will run out of space. Religious beliefs aside, cemeteries are an unsustainable plan. And speaking of sustaining them, someone would have to mow and fertilize the grass over me, and loved ones would feel a responsibility to visit and buy plastic flowers. Well, not the loved ones in the car that particular day, apparently, but some loved ones somewhere might.

When my father passed away a couple decades ago, my sister and I both realized that the part of him that we loved most was not the part buried in that grave. It was the part that was still with us in our hearts and souls. We've only been back to the cemetery once, but we carried the "We should go more often" guilt for years. We carry his clear tenor "You Are My Sunshine" with us to this day.

So no cemetery burial for this Mom. That still leaves the problem of what to do with her. My dear, sweet daughter wants me cremated and made into a diamond. I asked her how she'd feel when she accidentally dropped me down the drain. My dear, sweet sons had several suggestions, most of which involved pet food and street gutters. My dear, sweet husband just smiled.



My explicit directions that I am to be cremated and my ashes scattered somewhere beautiful that I have never been before was met with rolling eyes and several suggestions of places that I have never been. I was thinking something like Yosemite, people. Obviously, my loved ones cannot be trusted with my physical remains when I'm gone, adding to the list of reasons I intend to haunt them for the rest of their lives.

The dilemma, however, has been solved. I have found a way to live forever.

OK, not literally. But I have found a way to continue to nurture and support life, help save the planet, give my loved ones a tangible memorial, and still rest forever in a beautiful location I have never visited once I am gone.

ecoMemorial.org was founded by Bob Riley, an environmentalist who noted that "Most green and natural burial methods are based on the idea of minimizing the negative impact of human remains on the environment." Instead of minimizing the negative impact, Riley found a way that human remains can in fact "create a positive environmental impact that would benefit future generations."

ecoMemorial uses cremation ashes, or cremains, as the germination medium for a mangrove seedling. As the seedling develops, the cremains are assimilated until the mangrove becomes a mature tree planted as part of a coastal restoration project along the Caribbean coast of Belize.

Mangrove forests are nature's barrier against hurricanes and tropical storms. Those storms have been aided by human development in depleting the mangrove forests, leaving coastlines

and their communities vulnerable. Hurricane Katrina caused such great damage due in part to the loss of the wetlands that served as the natural buffer between the Gulf and solid ground.

According to LiveScience.com, “After Katrina, the state recognized the danger of losing more wetlands and created the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority. In a report last year, the agency recommended coastal restoration measures to repair some of the damage done by pipeline construction, poor urban planning and natural subsidence (sinking of land).” As of right now, however, the plan to restore our wetlands does not include ecoMemorial.



The mangrove restoration project in Belize suits my needs perfectly. Mangrove trees grow in intertidal areas where the tides constantly rise and lower around them, much the way I have grown as my own life has ebbed and flowed. They flourish only as they straddle their merged habitats of land and sea, much as a mother flourishes only as she straddles the merged needs of her family and self. Mangroves exist to provide shelter and protection and to live on in future generations in an effort to restore beauty and balance to the world. Yup. In my next life, I'm going to be a mangrove. Literally.

Belize is far enough away that there is no need for loved ones to feel guilty if they don't visit. They can if they want to, or they can plug the GPS coordinates provided by ecoMemorial into Google maps for a quick peek. ecoMemorial will also provide Internet links to my eulogy or any personal websites if I so chose. Anyone out there who can't stand the thought of being parted from their beloved Fido can get him his own ecoMemorial tree, or have his ashes worked right into your tree with you.

So the problem of “What to do with Mom once she's dead” has been solved. Of course, there is no way to guarantee that my family will honor my request. But they all know that if they don't, I will haunt them for the rest of their lives.

I just might haunt them anyway. There should be some “just for kicks” in the afterlife, don't you think?

To contact Julia Goralka, see above. Information on ecoMemorial can be found at ecoMemorial.org