

Ordinary 18C (Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21)

by [Daniel Schultz](#) in the [July 20, 2016](#) issue

I would like a natural burial, or something close to it. Wrap me in a shroud, stick me in a pine coffin, and plant me deep enough that the coyotes won't snuffle and paw around for my corpse. Three feet ought to be enough.

I even know where I want to be buried: in the churchyard of my current congregation. It's on a wooded slope literally at the end of the road, a narrow dirt trail lined with fences and birdhouses as it bumps across a farmer's fields. Mostly you see sparrows as you go down the lane. Sometimes a bluebird will alight on a post, once in a while a Cooper's hawk. Stand at the other end of the long driveway and the terrain drops more steeply to a basin—I call it a pond, the churchpeople call it a swamp—of reeds and open water. I breathe deeply every time I visit. It's home of a sort, a good place to rest and await.

At the end of each semester, my wife invites me to speak to her psychology students about death, about the final stages of human development. I lecture on how the major causes of death change over the course of a lifetime, how the experience of death has changed in the past century, and how the grief of survivors plays out.

I think about these things. Most college students do not. Some have lost a parent or grandparent; a few have even nursed the dying. But for the most part they are not at a point in their development to spend much time considering death, especially not their own.

Usually the conversation winds around to the many ways to dispose of a corpse. This is less threatening terrain, easier to sit with than the idea that death could happen to them. Most of the students prefer cremation, but they also like the idea of being shot out of a cannon, or blasted off in fireworks or into outer space. A few would rather leave their bodies to science (cadaver farms are popular) or have their remains buried with a seedling, so that an oak can rise from their ashes. Nobody ever opts for being picked apart by the vultures at the Taj Mahal.

They typically find the idea of natural burial disturbing: they don't like the idea of a slow disintegration below the sod. I find it comforting. Let the nematodes and my own gut bacteria have me. I like to think about being returned to nature, about literally ending the cycle of life in the dirt and dust from which I arose. Soon enough, if all goes according to plan, my only remains will be a grinning skull and a few scraps of clothes.

Fine by me. This death won't be the one that counts, after all: I died in baptism and was reborn, alleluia, alleluia. So stick me any old place; I won't complain. I've already been dead a long time, my life hidden in Christ. When Jesus calls me, I will answer. When he needs me, he knows where to find my bones and my dirt.

Paul says the hidden life is a moral one, very much a this-worldly dedication to the pursuit of virtues and to putting off vices like a set of dirty old clothes. The man could preach fire and brimstone when he wanted to. I prefer to take things in another direction, to think about being absorbed into nature and becoming a part of its sacramental revealing of God's presence in the world. Elsewhere in Luke Jesus says that God feeds the ravens, clothes the lilies and the grass. Because God will provide for them, his followers have no need to hoard things: they can afford to live with open hands.

They used to call a cemetery like ours the *friedhof*, the "place of peace." If you could see how beautiful it is there, feel the quiet running into your bones, you would know why. Nature preserves function as an ecological gift to future generations, a counter to the foolish hoarding of creation. As the American population continues to grow and suburban lawns sweep the peace of the world into private stashes, perhaps we ought to understand old rural cemeteries in the same light. They provide a haven for trees, birds, squirrels, and rabbits—and the things that eat them, of course. But they also provide a haven for humans, a refuge to connect with generations and breathe the deep calm of a place set aside. No double-slot niche in an industrial columbarium wall could do as much to counter the hoarding of serenity.

God has plans for you and me. They run up to the horizons of our death and beyond, and sometimes they result in a sudden, peremptory demand for our soul. Better to be prepared, the scriptures tell us, by making the most of our lives in love and generosity. Otherwise, we may be caught, like the fool in this week's Gospel reading, with a full silo and an empty heart.

I wonder, though: is it possible to give even a generous death? Aldo Leopold wrote about the “land ethic,” the idea of humans cooperating with nature for mutual upbuilding and benefit. Perhaps Christians ought to consider a death ethic, an effort to create something good from our own mortality. I do not fully understand why, but it is a tremendous comfort for me to dream of lying under stars, wind, a blanket of snow—to dream of glorious, gentle rot slower than even the decay of oak leaves, my hands opening in death to give life to the soil and peace to those who visit my bones in the morning. I’ll never sell my wife’s students on the idea in a million years.