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From Death to New Life: The Ethics Behind Human Composting

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**From Death to New Life: The Ethics Behind Human
Composting**

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Abstract

Substitute methods of burial and funerals have been researched as populations rise and natural environments continue to be depleted, and human composting has become a leader in combating these issues. Still, the idea of having a loved one naturally decay in dirt has not sat comfortably for many family members and friends, deeming it as disrespectful in meriting a person's life. With a compelling graduate thesis, Katrina Spade lit the movement of green burials and is fighting for them to be normalized and offered to those who have a green thumb and dedication to helping the earth's natural resources. Her efforts have created the first human composting company, "Recompose," which has sparked much debate about whether this new method of treating the dead is ethical or not. Human composting can be proven ethical, as it gives a new way of honoring the dead, it provides consent throughout the process, it has been legalized in numerous states, it provides current and long-term benefits, and its procedure is very similar to cultures and religions that have been practicing green burials for many generations. This research, focused on the context of the United States, provides a new insight to tackling and accepting this new life-after-death decision.

Keywords: human composting, burial, funerals, green burials

From Death to New Life: The Ethics Behind Human Composting

During funerals, loved ones and friends all arrive mournful and fully dressed in black. There is good reason, knowing that an important member of their lives passed away and is no longer with them. It is a very sad day, but it does not have to be focused on the idea of death. Why do most people mourn during death instead of celebrating the life the loved one had? There is a stigma around the idea of death that can make it seem disrespectful to be happy when people are crying. Some people believe that human composting is unethical and can become squeamish around the idea of their loved one decaying and being used for worm food, with many believing death is sacred and the burial ceremony should be modest and respectful. Others believe it can be the answer to switching burial spaces for public green spaces, farming, and overcrowded populations. Although there are mixed opinions, advocates have begun exploring sustainable practices and new ways of burial, and have turned to human composting as an option. Allowing human composting to provide nutrients and newfound aliveness in soils is a fresh and ethical sustainable practice that can address growing populations and celebrate the gift of life.

Background & Significance

The idea surrounding human composting has not been an easy transition, with the first ethical issues and concerns clashing only a decade ago. However, with rising concerns of limited land use, increased funerary service costs, and a growing interest in being sustainable throughout and beyond one's life, composting human remains became a suggested method of life after death, where people actively use the remains to become usable soil in the future. This concept, which had the possibility of remedying the worries of death and recognizing the interests within it, was

introduced by Katrina Spade in 2013 in her graduate thesis. Her idea became a reality when she became the CEO of the first human composting company based in Seattle, Washington, back in 2021, called Recompose. Spade made Recompose with the vision of making a “dark, quiet, and safe” space for bodies to rest and loved ones to feel the presence of lost individuals (Cummins, 2022).

Human composting is defined as organic material, such as the body, that is broken down to provide nutrients for soil that can be used for new organic life. This new life can grow plants in gardens, farm food, and a tree in front of the house. The scientific way researchers describe human composting is called natural organic reduction (NOR), where experts describe it as “the contained, accelerated conversion of human remains to soil.” They describe the process as putting the human body in a vessel and filling it with other organic materials such as mulch, wood chips, and straw, and then letting the remnants decompose so it can become nutrient-rich soil in as little as one to two months. Human composting is currently only legal in six states: Colorado, Washington, Oregon, Vermont, New York, and California (a Greener Funeral, 2023).

Literature Review

Burial practices of humans have remained the most consistent process for thousands of years. Many families and friends of people who have passed have the usual practices of funerals and traditional ground burials in caskets. Other methods of final resting places include cremation, mummification, shrouding, and burial vaults. However, with a rapidly modernizing world and an effort to become more sustainable, many environmentalists have started supporting the movement to practice human composting. It is a highly debated issue, with one side hoping

to save natural landscapes in an ever-growing global population and the other arguing that it disrespects the human body, mostly with a moral belief grounded in a person's religion. The literature review aims to reimagine the idea of death, bring in the sustainable benefits of NOR, and break down cultural and religious stigmas around human composting. Ultimately, this paper will uncover how the use of human composting is an ethical new way of putting the body to rest.

Reimagining the Concept of Death

Perhaps the biggest concern with the idea of NOR is that people are uncomfortable with having a recently passed beloved be turned into the Earth's dirt. Death in many places is seen as a sacred ritual, no matter where it is practiced. It is seen as a solemn experience, where celebrations and happiness during the procession can be deemed disrespectful. Human composting respects all of the recently passed friends' and families' well-wishes, encasing the body in prospective new life, just in a different form: through the earth. It can be a uniquely beautiful and memorable vigil that people can remember more, and it can offer a new method of burial for individuals who are known to have respect for nature.

A fundamental point to acknowledge with death is that people have a concept of what the afterlife consists of. Whether that idea is surrounding heaven or rebirth in another body, people are concerned about where a person's spirit would go, and if it is ethical to have the body's final resting place in a dirty area such as soil. The fact of the matter is that NOR can contribute to the afterlife concept of rebirth and the idea surrounding immortality. The life of the dead is revitalized into a different form of life. Author Shiloh R. Krupar introduces this belief with the concept of bioremediation. In this process, the dead body and body parts are put to work in new

ways, adding value to the life of the corpse and value to the Earth's turf. Krupar describes the practice of human composting to be seen through an ethical lens, in which the idea can help environmental, land, and human ethics. Bioremediation completely reconsiders how the body is composed and instead is thought of as "returning the dead body to nature." Within land ethics, human composting and bioremediation can support conservation efforts in saving natural land and spreading nutrients through the soil to grow a greener world. Most importantly, the ethics of the humans involved are considered, in which bioremediation and its process of using the whole body to help preserve natural life must be consented to by the deceased's family or a trusted representative. With this prior consent for such a significant way of using the body, the body can greatly impact the environment and add new value to the deceased's life (Krupar, 2018).

The average citizen may oppose natural organic reduction, but Ecological Death Advocates (EDAs), a group composed of scientists, entrepreneurs, and more, support NOR as they advocate for more environmentally sensitive and humanized alternatives to death methods. EDAs support the claim that modern times call for modern approaches to problems, such as how leaders can do their part in saving space for a growing world. EDAs have captured the attention of United States organizations such as the Green Burial Council, who have been looking for alternatives to increase the use of green burials. They say, "The death care industry needs to embrace a new ethic for a new era" (MacMurray & Futrell, 2021). Reconfiguring the idea around death is the ethical choice, not only for creating advanced alternatives for burial practices but also for future generations to live with adequate space and a green environment. With climate change being a serious threat to the future, embracing a sustainable approach to

death can significantly impact the earth and give an individual a new type of “living legacy” in which the recently passed can “live on.”

The Legalization of Natural Organic Reduction and Its Benefits

With a demand to face a growing population and ground burials and cremation adding to the environmental climate change crisis, leaders have been called to take action. Many political and environmental leaders who have legalized human composting hope to change the stigma around death and offer their citizens alternatives to intimate and sacred burial practices. Each leader has their reasoning to allow the green process of composting the body, with most reasoning put into helping back up its environmental benefits and shifted perspective around death. A few states around the U.S. have been uptaking the composting of human bodies, with NOR organizations uprooting in different areas to keep up with passing laws. What convinced states like New York and California to accept such a delicate construct? In such populous states, there is no doubt that state leaders and politicians try their best to gather citizen opinions and better their practices. Funeral association surveys asked Americans for their opinion and found that 52% would consider green burial practices such as NORs. Not only is it a topic that piques the interest of Americans, but it also reaches the attention of its youth. With younger adults not being afraid to discuss subjects on life-after-death and sustainable actions, NOR organizations have begun to reach out to them. Organizational efforts aim to impact the youth, as they recognize that they are the face of the future. What is offered by the adults of modern times is what the youth grow up with. There is no reason the option should be stripped from them. As the young generation continues being described as “death positive,” leaders such as Matthew

Kochmann, founder and CEO of a human composting company that uses mushrooms, called “Transcend,” work directly with lawmakers and legislators to make ethical decisions and even, an ethical framework. EDAs, youth, and half of the national population are interested in making death a comfortable topic in society to destigmatize the negative connotations that surround it, and NORs can be the first step in making that happen (Paul, 2023). When state politicians and leaders make an effort to legalize such a green funerary service and include the youth, not only does it prepare the future for the positive impacts of today, but it pushes society to recognize the benefits and growing ideologies of accepting NOR.

Considering that the new burial process is increasingly accepted by today’s youth, the benefits of NOR can convince other audiences of its ethicality. The benefits of human composting go beyond just being an alternative new burial method. For one, a human body can provide around 250 to 1,000 pounds of soil, depending on the type of organic materials mixed with the body. This can fill several wheelbarrows, contributing to new plots of land that can grow the area. On top of that, the human body holds numerous elements and minerals that can enrich the soil and nourish plants, such as carbon, calcium, magnesium, nitrogen, and phosphorus. The option of NOR providing additional organic materials in the soil for land not only benefits the surrounding environment and the flora that can result, but it also enriches the ground with needed minerals to allow nourishment for the earth. It can be immensely sustainable for the richness of soil, which nowadays is usually depleted due to human activity. Additionally, many people struggle to also pay for funerals or processes related to them, but NOR is cheaper compared to other funeral costs, ranging from \$3,000 to a little less than \$7,000, while other burial methods are around

\$7,000 and more. With NOR providing a cheaper alternative for grieving families and friends, anyone can save money and use expenses on other items, for example, medical costs before the death of their loved ones. All these positive outcomes that sprout from human composting can prove that the process can be used for good, therefore contributing to the claim that the act can be ethical if those who choose to use the process do so (Wolfson, 2022).

Perhaps the most significant benefit is the long-term effects human composting can do to aid humanity's future. The crisis regarding climate change is well known, and many environmentalists and EDAs have advocated for reduction methods of carbon emissions. One of these methods includes human composting. Founder and CEO of Recompose explains how less energy is used when composting the human body, compared to other funeral services like cremation, which uses fossil gasses and adds carbon emissions to the atmosphere. With human composting breaking down the organic material of bodies, carbon that is retained in the body is redistributed within the soil, adding new nutrients to the soil for future life. Besides the nutrients that are added, it allows human composting recipients and families to lower their use of nonbiodegradable materials. There is no need for metal or wooden caskets, and instead, natural materials are used to decompose the body. Workers who help compost the human body are also protected from chemicals such as formaldehyde, which is normally used when a body is embalmed and is known to be a carcinogen. Human composting reduces carbon footprint and protects individuals from risky environmental factors on their health (Rogers, 2022).

Cultural Ties and Community

Although the process of human composting has become a more accessible burial method

with Spade's popularization, it is not a new method that rests and honors the dead. Many religions have their way of respecting the dead and how they bury them, including using materials made from the earth. Other countries do it due to overpopulation and no space to have cemeteries. These groups have a reason they repurpose the lives of their loved ones, with explanations to why it is ethical and appropriate for them.

For both Jews and Muslims, their religions share similarities, encouraging the use of biodegradable materials to bury the dead. They have their beliefs, and similarly, those beliefs and practices also benefit the earth. Jews have always practiced their green burials, in which they use a practice called ghusl. In ghusl, the corpse is washed and wrapped in a shroud. From there, the body is either buried without a coffin if the local laws allow this, or the body is put into a biodegradable casket. It is similar to Recompose's process, just without the soil, wood chips, and alfalfa that surrounds the body in Spade's NOR ritual. With Jewish and Muslim burial practices paralleling that of Recompose's procedure, it shows how the idea behind green burials and human composting is not a new concept of burial; it is barely being introduced in Western countries such as the United States. Other religions have practiced similar burials, and Recompose could have drawn inspiration from these beliefs, with some slight differences in materials. Nonetheless, the procedures are intertwined with similar purposes: to honor the dead and compost the body so it is not "contained" (Taylor, 2022). In a related manner, the Islamic religion requires the body to also be shrouded and quickly buried in the soil without a casket. This green burial is also said to benefit the environment while also respecting the deceased. Edward Ahmed Mitchell, the deputy director of the Council of American-Islamic Relations,

describes that mechanically crushing a human body to be human composted goes against Islamic law, yet many people have an idea that this is how human composting is done. This misconception paints a wrong view of what NOR is, when it is actually letting the natural processes of decomposition break down the human body to be renewed into new life. Explaining the procedure of human composting can be confusing for those who are skeptical of the green method, but simple education and understanding of human composting can reassure the doubters that it is a barely invasive approach, if not completely harm-free (Silverstein, 2022).

The claim that human composting is ethical due to a person's religion is acceptable but, but religion can also be used against the argument that NOR is ethical. The Catholic Church opposes NOR, as it creates an "unfortunate spiritual, emotional, and psychological distancing from the deceased." They say that composting is for agricultural waste, and does not respect the dead. It is an uncomfortable idea to them, which is understandable as it is a new method (Eberl, 2022). However, with Catholics following lessons from the Bible, they fail to remember and interpret one important quote; Genesis 3:19 says, "From dust you come, and to dust you shall return." As Katrina Spade discussed human composting in her graduate thesis, so did University of San Diego student Sydney Ederer. Ederer touches on this Biblical statement, stating that God's will is to have his creations—humans—return back to the earth. She connects this statement to all the religions that practice a natural burial method, including, Islam, Judaism, and Daoism beliefs that focus on an environmentally-friendly burial. She states that "Returning one's body to the earth after death through human composting is a great opportunity to unite with the divine in the smallest specks of His creation" (Ederer, 2018). Ederer and Spade both juxtapose the Catholic

Church's opinion of human composting, by using the Bible's statement to counteract. Although Catholics may claim that NOR is disrespectful of the deceased, their own beliefs that lay in the Bible say that humans will always return to the earth at the end of life. Of course, everyone has their own beliefs in their religion if they do follow one, and no one is forced to go through with human composting. However, faith-based ethics do accept the use of NOR practices, and although Catholics oppose the procedure, it is possible to interpret biblical passages as accepting of the method.

Results and Discussion

Research from previous articles contained many reasons why human composting can be ethical and beneficial for future generations. The literature review was divided into three sections, as to frame three arguments that support NOR. One is that the idea of death needs to be reframed as a celebration and that human composting cannot be done without consent. Two, there is a reason why states have allowed this new method of burial, and they view the process as beneficial for following generations to live long and healthy lives. Three is that natural burials are already practiced in certain religions and cultures, but NOR is simply not a mainstream practice.

Human composting is ethical, but most people do not think so because they perceive death as a time of grief and solemnity. "There is no respect for the dead and for family and friends to grieve," is the usual opposition people may say. The way Katrina Spade has vouched for human composting reimagines death so that the body will be given more value if the idea of life is continued after the physical death. Composting corpses respects the dead by honoring the

life-giving powers of their bodies. If anything, NOR has the potential to be a more powerful way of honoring the dead, and allowing the dead to “live on.” Composting the human body builds a legacy of a human, from physical form to natural organic form. The process can be seen as more intimate and life-giving than other burials, where they enclose the body in a casket, away from everyone’s view, and cremation, which leaves nothing but ashes to a body that can bring new life. Of course, all of this cannot be accomplished without the actual preparation of the body which must first be approved by the family or representative of the recently deceased. The formal consent of the body from loved ones and even the prior consent of the person who died can create a bond of trust and peace of mind, knowing that the body is put into a new purpose. Consent is perhaps one of the most important ethical concerns, yet Spade offers a “precompose” sign-up for people to have their bodies composted. Additionally, other human composting facilities and practices must obtain the consent of the family or trusted representative of the deceased individual to conduct a sacred and honorable goodbye ceremony. These measures were put in place to make sure people have the right to choose NOR, which gives people the freedom of autonomy. Spade and other facilities give this self-governance to those who participate, so they can choose whether this burial method is appropriate for them.

With the intent to restore the future, human composting is an ethical approach to combat climate change and give new life to bodies. With an ever-growing human population, there is concern over resources and overcrowding. Cemeteries do not help this problem, as they take up valuable land that people can live comfortably in. Human composting can be a long-term benefit, especially if NOR can be introduced now, normalized in the future, and support the

overcrowding of areas. Thinking like this can be viewed as utilitarianistic. Utilitarianism follows the theory that actions are right if they are useful or benefit the majority. Taking a green approach to death can lower carbon emissions and raise awareness of the climate crisis so that future generations can live in a healthy environment. It helps that today's youth are the "death positive" generation, who are not afraid to talk about life after death and how to stay sustainable for their long-term benefit. In relation, this utilitarianism approach can connect to the Belmont Report, a set of ethical principles that professionals follow. Using NOR means that the benefits outweigh the risks. The only "risk" that is possible is a person who is uncomfortable with the concept of human composting.

Even though the concept of human composting is just recently sprouting conversation, natural burials are not new for some people. Other cultures practice the idea or have their version of the concept. Muslims, Jews, and Daoists from older cultures and even some communities in America, practice green burials, as most of them believe it is better to quite literally, return to our roots and become dust within the earth. Many communities accept this new way of life after death, so how would it be unethical if it has been practiced for many cultures? Catholics may oppose the idea due to their uncertainty, but even the Bible believes that we are made from the earth and will return to it again. Even so, it is recognized that not everyone is religious or falls under a different religion, so their opinion on human composting can be up to the individual. However, NOR should not be claimed unethical, as it is simply another way of appreciating those who have passed while also celebrating their life.

Limitations

There are a few limitations in the study worth knowing. The biggest one is that these ideas are mostly focused in the United States. Spade's ideas have mostly sparked controversy in America, as there are widely diverse populations. Do other countries legalize and accept the idea of human composting? With human composting being a fairly new process in the U.S., there is still a framework being developed. Thankfully, the facilities that are offering this burial method are licensed and look to ethical professionals for the procedure. There are also not many facilities that have this burial practice, as it is a newly offered technique, so long-term and significant outcomes may not be identified until later in the future. Public acceptance will take a while to attain if it ever does, which is difficult considering some people do not believe in the climate crisis and environmental issues.

Conclusion

The purpose of human composting is to provide a new alternative to the typical burial methods that are used today, such as in-ground funerals and cremation. Katrina Spade's idea has paved the way for Americans to celebrate their end-of-life in a more eco-friendly way, but it has also had many people question its intent and respect for the dead. Despite the skepticism, human composting is an ethical practice. Human composting gives a new perspective to life after death and gives the dying individual or close family member or representative free autonomy. It also provides various benefits to new generations, and is not a new method of burial, as the procedure is customary in certain cultures and religions. Composting human remains is becoming progressively normalized, and those who worry about the ethicality behind it should

acknowledge the benefits and legalization that NOR has already done to this date. It can be an uneasy idea to have a loved one placed within the earth, but as the Bible states, “from dust you come, and to dust you shall return.”

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