

On Becoming Compost

By Diane Choquette

When I first heard about human composting, I imagined bodies being put directly into a grave. It's been enlightening and interesting to learn about this new option for disposing of a body after death. Human composting is now legal in California, but facilities in California will not be ready to compost bodies until 2027. California funeral homes, however, can arrange for a body to be delivered to and composted in Washington, the closest state where it is legal. Also, providers in other states where the process is legal do offer their services to people in California, and I will mention some I found online throughout this column.

Human composting is also called "soil transformation," "terramation," and "natural organic reduction." I'd rather be straightforward and call it what it is—composting human remains. I like the idea, since it avoids filling the ground with caskets or spewing many pounds of CO₂ into the air through cremation. It appeals to me as a natural process, resulting in soil that has a useful purpose.

"Recompose" is a funeral home that claims to have invented the process for composting human remains. Located in Seattle, it offers its services to all 50 states. On their website, Recompose explains that each body is placed into a stainless-steel vessel along with wood chips, alfalfa, and straw. It takes five to seven weeks for microbes that naturally exist on the plant material, and on and in our bodies, to transform a body into soil. Any non-organic items, such as hip replacements or stents, are then removed from the soil. The soil rests for another three to five weeks, which Recompose refers to as "curing."

Once the process is complete, the soil can be used on trees and plants or donated to conservation efforts. Each body creates about one cubic yard, roughly 250 pounds, of soil that is delivered where you choose. You can elect to have portions of the soil, say, spread on the gardens of various family members or scattered in areas important to you. My husband's ashes were scattered in the Carquinez Strait, and my current Advanced Healthcare Directive specifies that I be cremated and my ashes also scattered in the strait. Now, I am seriously thinking of changing my plans, so it's nice to know that some of my composted remains could also go into the strait.

Some people find the composting process to be objectionable. In a recent article in the *California Globe*, Kathleen Domingo, the executive director of the California Catholic Conference said, "The process reduces the human body to simply a disposable commodity... The process was developed for livestock, not humans. These methods of disposal were used to lessen the possibility of disease being transmitted by the dead carcass. Using these same methods for the transformation of human remains can create an unfortunate spiritual, emotional and psychological distancing from the deceased."

How you feel about what happens to your body or that of a loved one is important to consider. Apparently, the process includes turning the vessel, as you might rotate a home composting container. If you object to that, "Return Home" is a provider that claims their process is the "most transparent, gentle, and ethical." They avoid rotating the vessel by using a flow of oxygen through the vessel to stimulate the breakdown.

Human composting facilities are eager to give you quotes on their websites. Recompose quotes an all-inclusive \$7,000 on their website, which includes transporting the body to their facilities. "After" is a virtual funeral home, assisting people with making arrangements for the final disposition of bodies. According to their website, the cost of human composting is between \$4,000 and \$7,000. Cremation in California can cost anywhere between about \$1,600, for just

the cremation, to around \$7,000 if a traditional funeral is included. By comparison, direct burial in California can cost up to \$8,000 without a viewing and funeral services, and can be as high as \$25,000. Advanced planning is available for human composting services.

To read more about human composting, check out the following websites: Recompose (recompose.life), After (after.com), Earth Funeral (earthfuneral.com), and Return Home (returnhome.com).