

Ashes to Ashes, Dust to Dust Being Part of The Big Cosmic ReCycle

I love the fall. Of course, spring, winter and summer are pretty wonderful too. But September and Michaelmas time are a special joy here at the ranch. Nights are cool, and during the crisp days the southern moving sun rays a golden sheen that hangs in the air and leaves one soul warmed within and flush with fresh energy for working. Though the garden is overgrown, there is harvest too, full colored fruits in all their bounty. Here in California where summers are hot and dry, we begin feeding the cattle hay in September.

We love to see the cattle gathered in the corral together, mooing, roiling and butting each other around or staring at us with big white lashed eyes waiting for the hay. My gaze passes over their glossy coats, jet black and rich auburn, sleek calves of a burnished hue a hair dresser would die for. I toss tid-bits from the garden to them as I work, sunflower plants whose cheerful yellow blossoms has dazzled our summer eyes, dried bean plants and grass. There can't be a sweeter music then than their munching and roiling in the dust of the corral. The soul says "Yes!" Yes to the great round of the cycle of life, Yes! to the oneness of it all. The feeling is as nourishing and satisfying as an elegant meal the satisfaction goes right down to the bones.

Full circle. Seed to plant to fruit to cattle to poop to compost to seed. I watch them artlessly and prefunctorily deposit the slick, steaming rich manure in the corral where we will pick it up in the wheelbarrows and take it to the place where we will make the compost heap at Thanksgiving. That is the weekend when family and friends gather the annual ritual complete with heaps of waste, leaves, laughter, showing off, slinging manure just off enough in trajectory to make a co-worker whoop and leap away, singing, praying, thanking the earth for all her gifts. as we make our grand loaf of compost ready to heat up and cook little kids stomping on the heap in between layers sprinkled with the magic potion of compost preps and singing "Give thanks for the Mother Earth, give thanks for the Father Sun, Give thanks to the garden where the mother and the father are one."

I'm getting ready for re-cycle too. My old bones will be part of the Big Circle before many years pass. Rudolf Steiner writes that human bodies are a help to the evolution of the planet. It's a good thought that even old bodies with bedraggled flesh and joints that are seizing up can have some value in the great universal compost cycle!

You know I have always wondered about what happens to us. I mean when we lose a lot of weight or when we shrink down with age. We de materialize. Where do we go to? I know in theory that we change all our cells every seven years but its hard to wrap your mind around. I guess we must always be leaving little bits and atoms of ourselves on the street, in parking lots and beds or flushed into the sewer systems. We were there in all our flesh and then there is a lot less of us. It is such a staggering concept to leave

our body that we are so attached to, so dependent on for well being in earth life and then in a blazing instant we are out of it and born in the spirit. Amazing!

So we leave the body behind and , as I tell my students, that's the physical part and subject to physical law, decay and gravity. And that all starts pretty quickly, about three days to begin to go back, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

Some people want to be buried and that is surely a time honored way to go. I am not sure if they are all fully informed though. Most cemeteries require the body be buried in a casket in a concrete vault. One of the major reasons for this is when a natural casket and body would decompose into the earth it would cause a depression in the earth above and the cemeteries would have a problem driving their power mowers over the grass. I turn that thought over in the mind like a dog worrying a bone and just can't make it fit in any social, economic, spiritual way with any kind of sense. We know that floods have sometimes taken down a hillside of a grave yard and disgorged all sorts of caskets but the vaults of concrete can wash out too. Then there is the part about stacking bodies several high in an economy for space ((that makes more sense than the concrete septic tank to me.)

But I'll take the fire thank you. Clean, swift, decisive and powerful. Yes, we can acknowledge the problem of smoke pollution but that can be modified with stringent filters and for sure a box of ashes doesn't take up as much earth space as a grave does. At my beloved brother's cremation we played drums. It seemed so appropriate, drums and chanting, "The earth, the fire, the air, the water, return return return return." Somehow drumming had never seemed more appropriate than in that powerful moment of transforming the earthly body back to the elements. I watched the temperature gauge gaining its maximum heat, a process my brother, the consummate engineer, would have loved, even as we all surrounded and hugged his grieving widow. Never will life be more real, more intense, breathtaking, awe inspiring and humbling than at the consecration and consummation of the body of a loved one through fire.

There is a movement in the country for natural burial. This certainly goes with the whole sustainability thing. There is a cemetery in North Carolina where people are wrapped in simple shroud and laid in the earth. There are no markers so it is kept wooded and pleasant and park like. People in Boulder, Colorado are working on getting such a cemetery working. When you think about it it seems so logical and simple. Why do we need all these elaborate caskets between us and going back to the earth?

One of my favorite stories is about the aunt of Ralph Waldo Emerson. She was a brilliant, eccentric and imminently necessary and vital presence in his life giving spark and fire to his wondrous and inclusive mind in his shy youth. As was the custom in those days one had a shroud or special burial garment. She had hers ready many years in advance of her demise and as she aged she was well ready to go but apparently too constitutionally sturdy to make a quick exit. Being practical as well as eccentric she decided the shroud was of excellent and durable material so she might as well make use of it and so was seen regularly wearing it around town determined to get some use out of it. That plus her frequent exclamations of desire to transcend earth life

made her ultimate transition an occasion of mirth and gossip and legend for the whole town of Concord when it finally came to pass.

There is a nascent movement in the country for natural burial. At Ramsey Creek Preserve in South Carolina, bodies are wrapped in a simple shroud or casket and laid in the earth. None are embalmed and there are no overt markers, so the area is kept pleasant, park-like and wooded with native species. A new industry has evolved for families to put ashes in concrete pods which are then placed in the ocean to strengthen the coral reefs. All this certainly goes with the sustainability awareness gaining importance in our times. Green burial is gaining momentum with over new 200 initiatives across the country as aging innovative boomers make their statements with environmentally PC decisions for their own funerals.....When you think about it.