

Where do the dead go?

NARRATOR:

The dead are all around us, but they're not just buried under our feet. How and where our bodies are laid to rest is a question with an endless array of answers.

Many cultures and even some animals bury their dead. From ancient barrows and tombs to cemeteries and green burial sites, there is truth to the idea of being dead and buried. But being six feet under only scratches the surface.

The ancient Romans preferred to hide their dead underground, even forbidding burials within the city walls. This led to cemeteries lining the roads leading into cities, and in some cases, the development of underground catacombs.

Nowadays, you can visit catacombs in Rome and Paris. It is estimated that the ossuary in Paris holds the remains of over six million people.

Keeping ancestors close, or not, is something that people around the world do in different ways. You may be comforted by visiting the grave of a loved one but for some, this isn't close enough.

In parts of the Philippines, it is traditional to bury one's family member under the floorboards of the house. In other areas, people may exhume the dead on special occasions or for additional funeral rites, bringing the ancestors' skeletons to feasts and celebrations.

Some take this closeness even further by having a relative's ashes mixed with ink and tattooed onto their own body.

Dwindling land space for burial has led to creative solutions in several countries. Family mausoleums have been used in several places, including in Buenos Aires, Argentina to house the remains of several people, sometimes with elaborate decoration.

In Singapore, most bodies can only be buried for 15 years before being exhumed, cremated, and further interned. This allows for the reuse of limited burial plots.

In Japan, high rise columbaria have been built to store the cremated remains of thousands of people over several stories. In other countries, some look higher still and send ashes to be scattered from the edge of space.

The idea of looking upward to manage the dead is not a new one. Sky burials have been practised in India, Nepal, and Tibet for hundreds of years, laying bodies out in specific places so that birds, especially vultures, can facilitate decomposition.

In fact, nature like this often plays a part in the decision of where and how we're treated after death. To return to the Earth in as natural and swift a way as possible is an increasingly meaningful choice for some.

Green and shallow burials trade preservation for decomposition, using fewer chemicals and switching a thick wooden casket for a wicker one or a thin biodegradable cloth.

Some designers have even created burial shrouds that promote the growth of fungi from a human body.

Endorsed as an environmentally friendly alternative to cremation, 'resomation', sometimes called water cremation or alkaline hydrolysis, uses liquids to break down the body, leaving just a water-like fluid and some bones that are turned into fine ashes.

Globally, how we treat the dead and where we put them has created a multitude of practises that are deeply meaningful, fascinatingly diverse and an ever-present reflection of the innate care and reverence we hold for those who have died.

But as our values, beliefs, spaces, responsibilities and even the environment around us change, what might the future hold for our bodies after death?

Where else might they go or what might they become after we've supposedly gone?