

A Play Date with Death

Cemeteries Offer Car-Free Sanctuary for the Living

By Lou Bendrick

Halloween is a holiday with so much untapped potential. It potentially offers us a chance to indulge in two cultural taboos at once: death and the wanton consumption of Snickers bars. While the latter is easy to offer (go to Price Chopper for a jumbo bag), the former is a bit tricky. We live, after all, in a country where we don't die. We "pass away" or "expire" as if each of us were dated for freshness. And it's hard to explore the mystery of the great beyond amid holiday mounds of pumpkin kitsch made in China.

I try to get into the true spirit, so to speak, of Halloween at cemeteries.

I learned to love cemeteries when I lived in a small town in the West which had a cemetery on a hill near the end of a box canyon. One tourist season, when the town's main road was busy, I decided to use the cemetery as a shortcut to a hike. I had my dog with me, so I figured I'd have to sneak through. I was surprised to find not only an open gate, but also a dispenser for pet pick-up bags. I'd always thought of cemeteries as somber, if not downright creepy, places. What I found in that cemetery was something else entirely. People were using it as a public space (there were signs warning skiers about "dangerous obstacles," i.e., tombstones, under the snow). It was easy to see why this cemetery had become a quasi-park: It not only had some of the best views in town, as cemeteries often do, but it was also quiet, well-tended and car-

free. In short, a perfect place to walk a dog. I became a regular. explosions in the mines—but sometimes I knew something of how they lived. A silver miner had a fiddle engraved onto his headstone. Another grave marker was a large statue of a woman cradling two children. A child's grave, which was frequently strewn with toys, was marked by a marble bunny; the nearby headstone of an adolescent boy bore a picture of a skier. A snaffle bit from a horse dangled from another marker.

"Show me your cemeteries," Ben Franklin once said, "and I will tell you what kind of people you have." Sometimes I placed a handful of wildflowers on graves that looked long-neglected—the faded grave of an immigrant miner, a baby's grave marked only by the figure of a sleeping lamb. I spent time with the living, too. Sometimes I stopped to chat with another regular, a man who brought dogs and gardening equipment to his wife's grave. They'd picked out the plot together while she was in the early stages of cancer.

Then, one December, a friend of a friend was killed when she fell asleep at the wheel and her car plunged into a deep, snowy ravine. Until then, my trips to the cemetery had been informative, pleasurable or even social. But the mound of freshly turned earth on this young mother's grave me a vivid image of the cycle of life. After that, I appreciated the cemetery even more.

Graveyards have been criticized by some environmentalists as a waste of perfectly good habitat, and there's a small movement afoot to green up graveyards with more native planting or by creating "green" cemeteries that double as conservation land. I'm all for it, but in the meantime I hope we make better use of the cemeteries we have.

Like wakes and funerals, cemeteries are for the living, not the dead. They offer a place to grieve and to contemplate life's bigger mysteries. And in the era of vanishing open space and more cars, communities are claiming cemeteries as public spaces. My experience in that Western cemetery wasn't unique; parents in

my town in the Berkshires take their kids to the local cemetery to ride bikes.

"We should meet for a play date at the cemetery," one mom told me. "There are no cars, and paved paths!" I'm glad that she's taking advantage of the cemetery, but it is a sad state of affairs that cars have hounded people out of the streets.

Not so long ago, Halloween was a play date with death. It started with the Celts, who marked the beginning of the long dark winter with bonfires and fortune telling on a night when it was believed that the dead returned to earth. (Rubber masks from China being unavailable, they dressed up in locally made animal heads and skins.) The Romans, and later the Christians, used the holiday to remember the deceased. Perhaps if we Americans were more comfortable communing with our dead, we would be more appreciative of Nature and her cycles.

So, in addition to a trip to Price Chopper this year to buy my share of Snickers, I'm going to find a graveyard. I'm taking my humility, a bird book and my dog.

Lou Bendrick haunts the graveyards of western Massachusetts.

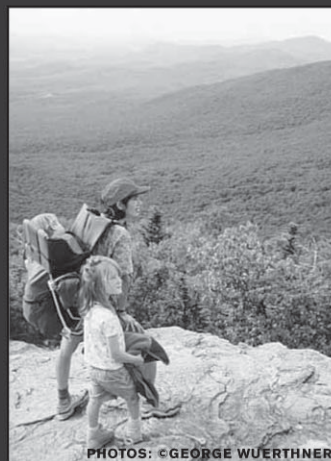


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It wasn't long before I became familiar with the headstones, and I soon knew a thing or two about the people buried there. Mostly I knew how they died—through wars, childbirth, influenza and



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