

# THE CREATIVE PRINCE MIDNIGHT

By Ryan Helfenbein

Rest in Peace might be the most universal phrase when it comes to referencing a loss. RIP is instantly recognizable as a sentiment of condolence throughout our culture. We see RIP on gravestones, in epitaphs and even molded into cemetery gates. This is often considered a peaceful term defining tranquil placement or even an undisturbed place of rest. A recent headline news story showed that perhaps some final resting places are not as undisturbed and tranquil as we might have originally thought.

A Florida man recently made national news regarding a homemade musical instrument he dubbed as the “Skelecaster.” Prince Midnight, as he refers to himself, created a homemade guitar from his uncle’s skeletal remains that were repatriated to him after the rent payment was not satisfied at the cemetery where he had been buried in Greece. Yes, believe it or not, in parts of the world, rent on grave spaces is paid much like we all paid for an apartment when we were first married. When a family decides to stop sending in their rent check, it’s time for an eviction.

In countries with this sort of ‘pay as you go’ arrangement, families do not purchase rights to use a grave space in perpetuity. Instead, a rent payment is made to use that given space for a particular time frame. Some of these cemeteries require a minimum rent for thirty years, while others are just over one year. At the conclusion of that rental agreement the family has first refusal of extending the rent to allow the individual the continuation of Resting In Peace or face eviction. Unlike Prince Midnight of Florida, when a family chooses not to take custody of the relative’s remains after eviction, cemeteries are typically left with two options. One of those options is to remove the existing human remains, dig the grave deeper, return the remains to the grave and fill it in back to the standard depth for that cemetery. The second is to completely remove the human remains all together and place them in a communal space with others who were evicted from their final resting place. Both options result in the same conclusion, making the grave space available for the next potential rent paying occupant.

Crazy, right? Yes, it is a bit out of the ordinary for us in the States, however unusual methods of burial happen closer to home than you might think. In Louisiana, the high-water table in the southern region of the state led cemeteries to alternative methods of interment. Above ground burial was a common method in both France and Spain, where many early settlers of New Orleans

originated. The practice of above ground burial most likely was instituted due to tradition from these early settlers. In 1789, the first above ground cemetery, St. Louis No. 1 Cemetery, was created in the city of New Orleans and is still a widely used method of burial. Much like that of the cemeteries which charge rent, the decedents in above ground burial spaces of New Orleans also do not rest in an undisturbed grave. The remains are placed inside walls of aboveground tombs and private family crypts. Due to the hot, subtropical climate of that region, the tomb effectively reaches temperatures close to that of a crematory and expedites the natural process. All that is left after a year’s time is skeletal

remains. Those remains are then swept into an opening in the floor of the tomb or crypt in preparation for the next occupant. It is very common for multiple families to be placed in the same tomb with names and dates then engraved on the outside as necessary.

Outside of New Orleans, the majority of cemeteries in the States can provide a perpetual place of rest. A perpetual care trust is created by for-profit cemeteries to ensure upkeep of the graves and cemetery grounds in perpetuity. This trust account is mandated by the state’s cemetery oversight committee and routinely audited by a state-appointed accountant. No rent is required for these burial sites. One payment secures the final resting place of an individual for all of eternity.

We find a wide variety of burial methods throughout the world. Everything from Tibetan Buddhists’ sky burial allowing exposure to the elements to expedite the process of “ashes to ashes and dust to dust” to Washington state’s new disposition method of human composting allowing human remains to become enriched topsoil for personalized plantings. Perhaps what the “Skelecaster” guitar has brought to all of our attention is that, along with everything else in our modern-day world, there is no one-size-fits-all solution to providing eternal rest.

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