

**What a way to go!**

**‘Human composting’ bill introduced in Springfield**

Chicago Democratic state Rep. Kelly Cassidy last week introduced [**HB 4552**](https://ilga.gov/legislation/BillStatus.asp?DocNum=4552&GAID=16&DocTypeID=HB&LegID=138034&SessionID=110&SpecSess=&Session=&GA=102), an amendment to state regulations on cremation that expands the definition of cremation to include “natural organic reduction,” which the bill defines as “accelerated conversion of human remains to soil.”

Human composting, in other words.

The process is based ona method already used for disposing of livestock in which the body is placed in a reusable container along with wood chips, alfalfa, straw wildflowers, leaves or other organic materials that accelerate decomposition as the container rocks or rotates. Heating the container to 131 degrees kills off any dangerous pathogens.

In roughly a month, everything has turned into about two wheelbarrows worth of odorless, nutrient-rich soil that biologists say is “unrecognizable visually, chemically or microbiologically as human remains” and suitable for use in a garden or elsewhere on private property.

The idea may not appeal to you, but the idea of being flooded with toxic formaldehyde and stuck in a box underground or being incinerated into ashy remains upon my demise doesn’t appeal to me. When my time comes, I’ll prefer, if the General Assembly allows it, to return to the natural environment that has sustained and nourished me and all my ancestors. With luck, I will play a small part in sustaining and nourishing future generations.

I want to decay into topsoil where I can return the favor to the flowers, the plants, the bushes and trees that have fed me in so many ways for so long. I want to, almost literally, push up daisies.

Natural organic reduction of human cadavers is already legal in the states of Washington, Colorado and Oregon. And according to Oregon funeral director Elizabeth Fournier, an unofficial spokeswoman for the human composting movement, the idea has purchase in Delaware, Hawaii, Vermont, Maine and New York as well as, now, Illinois.

But look out for the religious busybodies. In California, a human composting bill appeared certain to pass after a legislative committee OK’d it by a vote of 19-0 last April. But then, Fournier said, the Catholic Church began raising objections.

“The body is sacred and must be treated with all due dignity and respect,” wrote John Horvat II in “[**Human Composting: The Ultimate Denial of the Soul**](https://www.crisismagazine.com/2019/human-composting-the-ultimate-denial-of-the-soul)**,**” a column in Crisis Magazine, a conservative Catholic publication. Natural organic reduction “fits into a … worldview where everything is reduced to matter in constant transformation,” he wrote, summarizing the problem that the church has with the idea. “The body is not just a shell or husk that can be cast aside once the soul has departed” because “the body that is buried belongs to the person who will one day be resurrected and will once again enjoy possession of it.”

I will not bother to try to pick apart that absurd theology and try to reconcile it with cremation, which the church allows. But if God can resurrect a body from skeletons or ashes, God could logically do the same with loamy compost, what?

And, for the record, I will argue strenuously against anyone who tries to compel Horvat or anyone else to render himself or his loved ones into a couple of wheelbarrows of useful dirt.

But I won’t stand for the idea that his or anyone else’s religious notions about death, dignity, the soul and respect for corpses should prevent me or those who feel as I do from participating in an ecologically sound rite after death.

This issue is about the freedom of the individual to see dignity and morality in rejoining the circle of life. And the freedom to act on the belief that there can be nothing more sanctified than living on to repay, if only at the microbial level, the planet that gave you so much.

And, anyway, human composting is really not much different than the choice of a “green burial” in a biodegradable box or shroud that is [**currently allowed in Illinois**](https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-biz-chicago-area-funeral-homes-offer-green-funerals-20191031-6ywiogokkncm5aotocedqaey7q-story.html)**.** Such burials, which don’t use embalming fluids and have a tiny carbon footprint, are available at a handful of cemeteries. But they don’t allow you to end up in your own yard or on a forest floor.

The very religious freedom that Catholics hold so dear demands that the General Assembly pass this bill.

