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Life

The strange lure of burial grounds

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News Desk

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A memorial to the dead has been built from old tombstones at the St-Colomban Cemetery, in the town by the same name near St-Jérôme. PHOTO BY PHIL CARPENTER /The Gazette

MONTREAL — At least once a year, my father visits his hometown. And when he does, he always pops by the local cemetery. Not only to pay his respects to family, but to place a flower on Charlie Murphy's grave.

My father has never met Charlie Murphy. He knows nothing about him. All he knows is that one day about 40 years ago, while walking through the burial ground, he came upon Murphy's small headstone, with its Chinese and English inscriptions all alone in the far right corner hidden away in the trees. And it made him sad.

Why was this man not buried with the others? Had he done something wrong? Was it because he was a foreigner? Was it his religion? Was he a pauper — too poor and considered not worthy of a proper memorial?

My father will never know. The Brockville, Ont., cemetery has nothing on file other than Murphy's name and location. It cannot explain why he is separated — or perhaps segregated — from everyone else. There is no record of when and how he died. Or even his real name — presumably Chinese. Murphy's life — and death — are a mystery.

"So be it," says my father. "But no one should have to die alone and so far away from home."

So my father, who has been living in Vaudreuil for more than 50 years, stops by the cemetery every time he goes back to Brockville, and places a flower on Charlie's grave. And he spares a thought for all the people who have come before him and who now rest peacefully in his midst.

My father is not alone in his interest in old gravestones. Some people devote much of their lives visiting burial grounds, not only as a link to family and the past, but because they find them tranquil, beautiful, educational, entertaining and culturally significant.

People who spend a lot of time in cemeteries are sometimes known as grave hunters, graveyard junkies or tombstone tourists. But there's an official name for them: "taphophile," from the Greek words taphos (grave) and philos (love). And taphophilia is an excessive interest in, or love of, cemeteries.

It's a ritual some might find strange.

Montreal psychologist Emily Blake says the reason many of us avoid graveyards is because people often struggle with uncertainty, and death is the epitome of uncertainty — none of us knows how and when we, or those we love, will die. Or what happens when it's all over. Cemeteries are a grim reminder that the only certainty in life is that we will leave it.

"Graveyards trigger thoughts of death which for some could represent uncertainty, pain and loss," says Blake, who holds a doctorate in psychology from McGill University and is the head of two psychology clinics, in Montreal and the West Island.

And because of those triggers, she says, many people find it easier to stay away from cemeteries.

Many, but not all.

"Some people do like to visit graveyards, and find it a helpful way to stay connected to those they love," Blake says.

My father is not sure he qualifies as a taphophile — he doesn't think his interest in cemeteries is excessive or obsessive, although he does find them fascinating and somehow comforting. And if he comes across a small church graveyard on bike rides near Vaudreuil, he will stop and check it out. He believes there is much to be learned from the occasional graveyard stroll.

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

It is likely Charles Mappin, author of *The Evolution of Montreal's Cemetery Space from 1642 to the Present* (1995), would agree. In this thesis, which he wrote while studying at McGill, Mappin writes that a closer look at our city's burial grounds can provide a rich education into the past.

"The opening chapter is the simple record of births and deaths of the community's residents," Mappin explains in his thesis. "The lesson goes on to reveal such information as people's lifespans, the popular names of the time, the ages at which people got married, and how big their families were. It shows where immigrants came from, what people did for a living, who married whom and who their children were. Epidemics and natural disasters are recorded. As people's beliefs changed through time, so did the types of symbols used in marking their graves. Piecing all these elements together provides a sociological timeline of our society."

My dad's done a bit of element-piecing himself, and believes Charlie Murphy's grave represents a dark — and racist — period in Canada's past. In the late 19th century, thousands of Chinese labourers came to help build the country's railways and worked in dangerous, dirty and deplorable occupations.

"They were treated like slaves," he says, and Murphy might have been one of them.

Kevin Ryan is a taphophile and has been all his life. He first visited cemeteries with his father when he was growing up in Hudson. And like my father, he has used his time wandering through graveyards to help piece together the past. Especially his own.

"My dad and I would go see our Irish ancestors in St-Colomban near St-Jérôme," says Ryan, 51.

He believes that's why he never thought spending time in graveyards was all that unusual.

"As a child, I developed a fascination with tombstones. And the older, the better."

When he was in his late 20s, Ryan became interested in his family tree, and has since visited dozens of Quebec graveyards in search of his forebears.

His favourite is [Notre-Dame-des-Neiges cemetery on Mount Royal](#), because it houses the remains of ancestors from different branches of his family. He can spend hours walking among the headstones.

Another graveyard of particular significance to Ryan is the St-Colomban Cemetery in the Quebec town of the same name. Many of the first people to be buried there were early Irish settlers, Ryan's ancestors among them.

But Ryan says even if there is no personal connection, he still can't pass up a good graveyard.

"I go to any cemetery I see, even if I don't know anybody in it. There is no place more peaceful."

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

"What I experience is the history of wherever I am, and also the tragedy of life. And it is all about the human condition — where we move, how we live and how we die. We all go through the same ups and downs and we all end up in the graveyard."

He usually goes alone — his wife and son don't share his interest in cemeteries, but he thinks maybe one day he can get his grandson Garrett on board. And he hopes that centuries from now, his descendants are able to visit his grave and learn about their history in the same way.

But visits to old family graves may one day be a thing of the past.

Canadians are moving away from burial. According to [the Cremation Association of North America](#), 62.8 per cent of us opted for cremation after death in 2012.

From there, the last stop is either the cemetery (where cinerary urns are stored in a vault-like columbarium), home or scattered.

Practical issues are also of concern. As populations and the demand for land increase, the future of many old — and new — graveyards is uncertain. Upkeep is costly and because cemeteries in Canada pay no property taxes and as such provide no municipal income (unlike housing, retail or corporate development), communities — especially urban — don't want them.

"When funds are limited, what do you do? Maintain necessary infrastructure or old graves?" asks my father.

They way things are going, it is possible that in 100 years, our descendants may find neither tomb, nor stone, nor marker to remember us by.

"That would be a real shame," says my dad.

Ryan agrees.

“It is sad to think that one day all traces of my family will be gone, but I guess it’s inevitable.”

In the meantime, my father thinks it is time for another trip back home.

As that cemetery in Brockville has grown more crowded over the years, Charlie Murphy’s headstone is no longer so isolated. But it is getting harder to find as some of the trees close in. Still, my father is not worried. Placing a flower on Charlie’s grave is a tradition he has passed on to me, and I now take my own children to visit when we are in the area. They may think it a wee bit peculiar, but they still know where to find him. And I am sure that one day, they too will ensure that Charlie Murphy is not forgotten.



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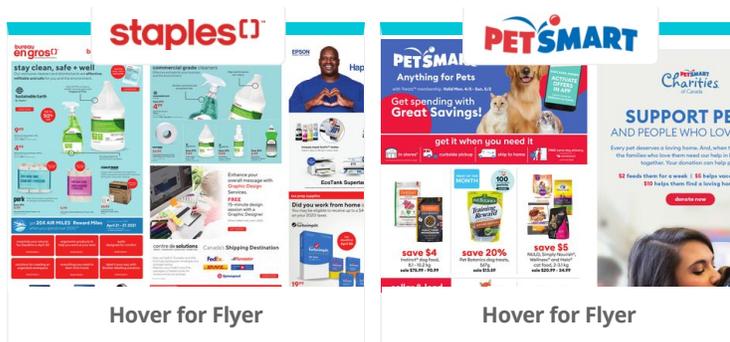
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