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Cemetery safety: Arrive alive and leave the same way

By: Jennifer Weber – published in the Examiner
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Last week we wrote about taking your children to cemeteries for educational and recreational reasons. We made the case for cemeteries being plentiful, free, full of art and life, and excellent places to take advantage of the teachable moment.

But in recent weeks two small children have lost their lives in cemeteries when monuments fell on them, crushing them to death.

Glenwood Cemetery in Park City, Utah, was the site of an accident that took the life of four-year-old Carson Dean Cheney on July 5, 2012.

A similar horrific scene unfolded on June 8, 2012, at Mount Paran Baptist Church Cemetery in Deep Gap, North Carolina, when four-year-old Peyton Townsend was crushed by a 1200-pound cross.

It's possible these tragic accidents could have been avoided if a few simple, common-sense rules of cemetery etiquette, behavior, safety, and supervision had been more closely observed. First, some basic advice about what to do before you ever set foot in a cemetery for the purpose of graving, walking, performing genealogical research, taking pictures, or obtaining tombstone rubbings.

Sole searching

The type of shoes you wear to walk a cemetery is dependent upon the climate, the time of year, the terrain of the cemetery, and the condition of the cemetery.

In some cases you may choose to walk on paved or otherwise sturdy, level, established paths, for exercise or to survey the graves from a distance. More casual shoes could suffice at such times.

If you plan to wander in and amongst the tombs, however, consider wearing sturdier shoes. Athletic trainers are a good all-purpose choice. Work-type or low-heeled boots may be more appropriate in colder weather, or at times when you'll be traversing ground that is uneven or wet.

Bear in mind always that should you lose your footing and fall, it is a foregone conclusion that some part of you will hit something very hard. Watch for sinking earth, snakes, and ground-nesting insects, as well as for broken stones or debris that could function as tripping hazards.

Wear abouts

Your clothing for the activity of graving or cemetery walking should be sedate and respectful as well as suitable for the type of weather conditions you're likely to experience.

Remember too that unless you are exploring a cemetery that no longer has burials, during business hours you could crash a funeral in progress. Take this eventuality into account when planning what you will wear.

Provocative or too-casual clothing is always disrespectful even in a deserted cemetery, but is potentially offensive when seen by those gathered for a graveside service.

If you find yourself in the vicinity of a funeral, you don't necessarily have to leave the cemetery, but stay as far as you can from the mourners. Don't stare, don't point, and don't take pictures. If you cross a roadway within the cemetery while a funeral is in progress, watch for moving automobiles.

Parking permitted

Speaking of automobiles, if you drive into the cemetery and park along the way to get out and walk, move your car from time to time. Don't get too far from it. In the case of an emergency or injury, you don't want to add to your troubles by having to search for your car. Obviously this is an issue only in larger cemeteries.

Heads up

Keep your cell phone with you at all times -- even in small, contained cemeteries -- but set it to vibrate. If you'll be gravestone by yourself, be aware of what is going on around you. Cemeteries tend to be isolated, solitary places, which is peaceful, but in certain circumstances it could make you a target.

Older, larger cemeteries situated in urban areas sometimes attract a seedier element. A good sign that this may be the case will be the presence of beer bottles or other litter scattered in the cemetery. After-dark partying in non-gated cemeteries is not uncommon.

Carry a canister of pepper spray if it makes you feel safer. There is always the possibility you'll meet up with a stray dog or other wildlife, even if you don't run into people. Walking with a stick may suit you just as well, but in any case, have a plan. The best defense is a good offense.

Buddy system

If you go gravestone with another adult or in a group, stay within sight of your partner or group at all times. "Shouting distance" does not apply here because it is inappropriate to shout in a cemetery.

When your children accompany you to a cemetery, under no circumstances allow them to leave you. Reading graves can be a very absorbing activity and children will not remember to keep track either of your whereabouts or of how far they've wandered.

Don't touch

Never allow your children to touch, sit on, lean on, lie down beside, or play around any monument that is not flush with the ground. Even a small stone is very heavy and, if dislodged, could cause serious injury.

The more historic the cemetery, the older the stones and the more likelihood of something going wrong.

In no instance is it proper to dance around, run, cavort, skip, play, roughhouse, fight, or otherwise act irresponsibly and disrespectfully around grave monuments. Many stone grave markers are tall and subject to falling although they may look solid.

If you allow your children to obtain a rubbing, choose a flat stone and make sure no taller stones surround it. At all times during the activity, keep your eyes and attention on what is going on around you and on what your children are doing.

Open for business

Often if a funeral is planned for the next day, a grave may already be opened. In most cemeteries tents will be erected at the site, and of course the grave should be covered with boards. Even so, an open hole is a temptation for most kids.

To be safe, do not go near open graves and certainly train your children to stay away from the funeral home tents. Nothing at such times and places is intended as a plaything for children, and there are many potential hazards.

If a funeral has occurred that day or the day before, there may be flowers and other mementos stacked on and around the fresh grave. These things are private and should be left alone.

Grave situations

Long-established graves may also be surrounded with items left by family and friends. Toys, candles, cards, figurines, balloons, flags, solar lights, and flowers are often plentiful on graves. Teach children that they may look, but never touch as these things belong to someone else.

Keep a weather eye

Some cemeteries are accessible at night but it's never a good idea to visit in the dark. Broad daylight will offer the best conditions for a cemetery walk or research session.

Likewise if the weather becomes inclement to the point that there is lightning nearby or dangerous wind and hail, come back another day. Everyone will still be there.

Quittin' time

Above all, when gravng in a gated cemetery, be aware of when the cemetery closes (usually there will be a sign with hours stated) and keep track of how long you've been there. This is especially important when you arrive late in the day.

My husband and I were once locked into a cemetery in Charleston, South Carolina, when we became so caught up in gravng that we lost track of time. We had to call 911 in order to be let out.

What could have been a haunting experience turned out to be only slightly embarrassing. We laugh about it now.

Happy gravng!

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Jennifer Weber is the owner of Angel Funeral Photography. When she's not preoccupied with taking pictures in cemeteries, she blogs relentlessly at I'm Having A Thought Here and A Route of Evanescence. She is a frequent contributor to Find A Grave, where she is known as AngelSeeker.