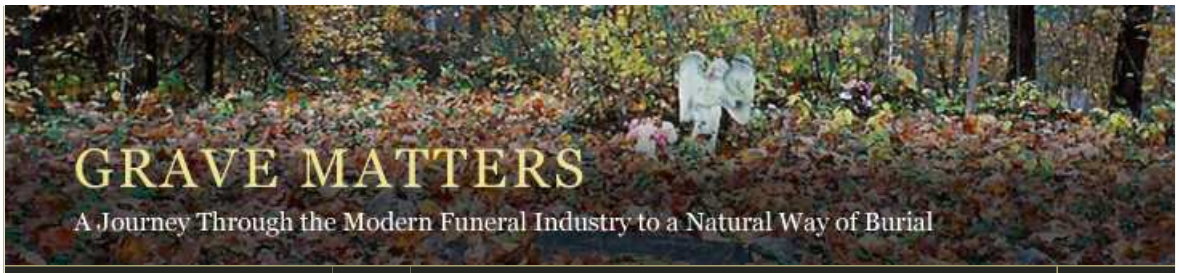

Chapter Excerpt

When I dived on my father-in-law's memorial reef a year after I'd sunk it, it was teeming with grouper, snapper, goliath fish and the whole wide range of sea life he wanted to join when he asked me to add his ashes to the artificial reefs we were building.

— Don Brawley, founder, Eternal Reefs

When you boil it all down there are just three things you can do with someone's ashes. You can inurn them, whether in an urn, niche, columbarium, or just up on a shelf. You can scatter, and that can be blasting the ashes in fireworks or sprinkling in the ocean. Or you can reef them.

— George Frankel, CEO, Eternal Reefs

Chapter Five: The Memorial Reef

On a blustery morning near the end of May, cloudy skies overhead, waters at a light chop, a sixty-foot tow boat named Defiant slips out of Ocean City, New Jersey, and heads to the open waters of the Atlantic. Her destination: the Great Egg, an artificial reef seven nautical miles offshore that the state department of environmental protection created to attract fish and other marine life to this quiet crescent of coast. It's here that the crew will wind a sling around each of the nine perforated domes that sit on its deck, raise them onto a wooden plank jutting from the stern, and – with a hearty tug – commit them to the deep.

Defiant's crew has sunk such "reef balls" before, hollow concrete modules that resemble igloos someone's punched a dozen holes into. Since launching its artificial reef program in 1984, the state has deposited some 4,000 of them into coastal waters stretching from Sandy Hook in the north, down to Cape May at the southern tip, in an effort to create the hard, reef-like substrate that draws ocean life. But the ones being deployed today are no ordinary reef builders. In addition to the sand, silica and micro-fibers that form a typical reef ball, each of those sitting on deck also contains the cremated remains – the ashes – of a person. On this late spring morning, the crew of the Defiant isn't just sinking reef material to the depths; it's burying at sea what's left of nine human lives.

One of the "memorial reefs" being deployed this morning is for John Slowe. On a bitter cold January afternoon two years ago, the New Jersey native collapsed in his living room after carting in firewood for a party the Slowes were throwing for an Eagles playoff game. A fireman who lived upstairs tried to revive him, an ambulance came, but to no avail. Slowe had died almost instantly of a massive heart attack. He was 56. "John loved the water. He often dived the shipwrecks off Long Island, and was always taking diving trips down to the Caymans or out to Hawaii," his wife Carrie tells me onboard the Miss Beach Haven, one of three charter boats that's following the Defiant out to Great Egg, ferrying passengers who have come to witness the placement of their memorial reef into the Atlantic. "He hadn't heard about this concept, but I know he would have loved the idea of returning to the sea, and creating a place for life there."

Carrie, a fortyish court stenographer who lives twenty miles north of Ocean City in Beach Haven, had first learned about memorial reefs a month after John's cremation. She'd been aimlessly clicking through T.V. stations one night when she came across a Discovery Channel program about an Atlanta-based organization called Eternal

Reefs. The show followed the group as it helped a couple of families mix the cremated remains of their loved ones into a concrete slurry that was poured into dome-shaped forms and then hardened into what the company dubbed memorial reefs. A month later, the cured domes were sunk into coastal waters, as families watched from charter boats circling the deployment site. Underwater video of older sites showed pods of memorial reefs on the ocean floor teeming with life, each ball sprouting coralheads, sponges, and other sea creatures, schools of fish darting in and around its open portals. The memorial reefs the Georgia company cast into southern waters of the U.S. were clearly no mere watery tombs; here the remains of the dead literally lay the foundation for new life under the sea. "I saw that show and thought: 'Oh, my God,'" says Carrie, who had placed the wooden box holding her husband's ashes on his bedside night stand and later transferred them to an old-fashioned diving helmet. "'This is just what I have to do with John.'" Two years later, heading out to sea aboard the Miss Beach Haven, she's on the final leg of a journey to do just that.

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The idea of using human remains to create habitat for marine life has its genesis in the coral reef beds of the Florida Keys. "When I was a student at the University of Georgia in the mid-1980s, my roommate and I would take diving trips to the Keys," explains Eternal Reefs' founder Don Brawley. "Todd Barber and I would take off from Macon at 6 or 7 at night, drive twelve hours straight and arrive at the Keys around sun-up. We'd pile out of the car at one of the first bridges we came to, pull on our diving gear, and do a dive right there." Those Florida roadtrips, funded on just enough pocket change for a cheap motel and a case of beer, made for outstanding diving in a tropical hotspot not so far from the hordes of other spring breakers. But those trips also brought the college diving buddies face-to-face with an environmental catastrophe in the making. "Every time we went back, the reefs looked worse," Don recalls. Fungal poxes stained more of the coralheads, plastic bags and other debris smothered others; heavy objects – dropped anchors, the propellers of passing motorboats -- had simply sheered off or smashed large chunks of reef. The coral reefs, both men could see for themselves, were deteriorating. And it wasn't just happening in Florida. Reefs around the world were in trouble and for many of the same reasons.

Back at home, the friends went on to graduate and launch their careers, Don in the computer field, Todd in management consulting. But the two couldn't shake what they'd seen in the Keys. At a party in the fall of 1990, they committed themselves to doing something about it. The plan they landed on was ambitious. Instead of merely protecting the natural reef from abuse, as some had done, they'd increase the reef's undersea footprint by creating more of it. The structures they'd make to do that would be artificial, formed from man-made materials. But unlike some other "design" reefs, which were crafted mostly to attract fish for anglers, theirs would so closely mimic the real thing that the coral-creating polyps, anemone, sea fans and other plant and animal life inhabiting natural reefs would literally take hold. "Our goal was to create the substrate that would support the whole ecosystem that revolves around a reef," says Don. "We wanted to actually create habitat for the microlife that everything else in a reef depends on."

The structure he and Todd designed for the task was a waist-high honeycombed dome they called a "reef ball." Cast from a thousand-plus pounds of concrete, the broad-bottomed module was sturdy enough to stay put on the ocean floor (its portals further dissipating current flows that might otherwise carry it adrift), and it offered plenty of rough structure, both inside and out, onto which encrusting organisms could attach and grow. The concrete itself the pair engineered for an underwater environment. They tempered its alkalinity to match that of salt water (thus boosting its life span and simultaneously encouraging marine life to latch on), and added microfibers and silica for strength. When dropped to the depths, their reef ball was built to last five hundred years.

Continued.

From the book's Resource Guide,

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