



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

ROAD TO EMMAUS

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A SIMPLE GRACE

Bruce Petersen, art director and graphic designer of *Road to Emmaus*, is also an experienced furniture maker who has launched his own business of making beautiful, inexpensive wooden caskets for burials. In this interview Bruce describes why people are turning to simple, more natural burials and the resources available to help.

RTE: Bruce, please tell us about your background.

BRUCE: I grew up as a missionary kid at the mouth of the Amazon in Brazil. Some of my earliest memories are of drawing, designing and building. Although my father was a school administrator by occupation, his free time was taken up in building furniture, which he learned from his father, a German cabinet maker who had emigrated to the United States. I now live outside of Portland, Oregon, where my father was from, on several acres of land with my wife, our two children, goats and chickens, and two barns. The ground floor of one of our barns is now my woodshop and the upper floor is the art studio of my wife Heidi, who is a painter and sculptor. I've been the art director for *Road to Emmaus* for close to fifteen years, and while graphic design is my business, woodworking and furniture design are a passion. I did a two-year mastery program in furniture building and design, but because it's difficult to make a living at fine furniture making, I keep that as a hobby.

RTE: What kind of furniture have you built and what turned you to casket making?

BRUCE: I've been building furniture for years, particularly liturgical furniture for churches. Requests to build caskets for family and parish members was really the first seed of my new business. In preparing to build those caskets I first researched what was available, and found that there were a lot of cheap knotty pine caskets, many poorly made caskets, and even more overly designed and expensive funeral home caskets. I couldn't figure out

Opposite: Bruce Petersen

why there wasn't something that was well designed and made out of quality wood, but not overly expensive.

Another point in the development of this business was when I worked on a casket for a friend who had passed away. When I went to a wood-working store to see what they had in the way of hardware for handles, they told me they had a set of hardware for caskets that came with a plan and that this was one of their most requested products. This was the beginning of my realization that there is a movement in this country to get away from funeral homes and to find a more natural, less expensive option.

RTE: How did your family and friends respond to your new enterprise, and since this is a family business, literally in your backyard, what do you hope your children will gain from it?

BRUCE: The family has been nothing but supportive. They thought it was a great idea. My wife comes from a line of entrepreneurs so for her starting a business was not scary at all; it was something she'd grown up with. So far the kids are involved with packing, and whether they like the business or not, I hope this will help pay for college and launch them in life.

RTE: I recently visited the home of a working woman in the Midwest who, when I went to sit down on a quilt-covered bench in her dining room, smiled and said, "You might want this chair instead. That's my coffin." A friend had made the casket for her and she was living with her "end" continually in sight. Yet surprisingly, it didn't seem at all morbid, just a kind of practical foresight. Do you find that people are interested in buying their own caskets, rather than leaving this task to relatives?

BRUCE: We've seen a strong interest in pre-planning. Many people tell us that they want to make their own arrangements so they aren't leaving this burden and expense for their children. Also, the fact that our casket is shipped and stores flat makes it ideal for someone who wants to buy it and store it.

There is also the "green burial" movement which advocates using more natural, less expensive means. Many people think that they have to buy a casket from the funeral home they work through, but this isn't true. Federal law states that a funeral home has to bury someone in whatever the family provides.

The unfortunate part of this search for inexpensive alternatives is that it feeds into the growing trend in the United States and Europe for crema-

tion. Except for the Eastern Orthodox Church, almost all of the Christian churches now accept cremation, including the Roman Catholic Church.

RTE: As for it being a burden on the children, I don't necessarily agree with this. For my brothers and myself, to be involved in planning their funerals was a last gift we could offer our parents, and I was grateful for the opportunity.

BRUCE: I agree with you, but many people want to do what they can to ease the stress on their loved ones at their passing.

RTE: And what motivates people to turn to cremation besides expense?

BRUCE: In many Christian churches, there is a lack of theological understanding of the connection of body and soul. Also, it's only in the last two decades that cremation has gained popularity in America. Many people also cremate for environmental reasons, although, interestingly, there is now a backlash against cremation in "green" burial circles because of the particles that go up into the air. But the whole mindset around burial is also contorted. Funeral homes sell hermetically sealed caskets, but why would you want such a thing? You want the remains to return to the earth as soon as possible, including the casket itself.

RTE: Its interesting that popular movies showing people spreading the ashes of their loved ones make cremation seem normal and even poetic, but for almost two thousand years the entire Christian Church stood against cremation, believing that only the Creator has the right to destroy the body. It is only in the past decades that many Christian churches have allowed cremation, although the traditional view still holds among Orthodox Christians. In fact, an Orthodox funeral, and often memorial services, cannot be served for someone who has chosen cremation, and even if a later memorial service is allowed, *kolyva* may not be used, as the wheat kernels represent the body that has been willfully destroyed. (The destruction of the body of a person who accidentally dies in a catastrophic fire or explosion is, of course, another matter entirely.)

A friend recently remarked that in destroying the body through cremation we are, in an unconscious way, colluding with death; that Christ has not only trampled down death by death but, "upon those in the tombs," He bestows life. Although we must accept physical death, we don't have to embrace it,

nor accelerate death's destruction of the body. Burying the body is like planting a seed that will flower in the new heaven and earth. The Lord's own body was buried in a particular and meaningful way, and He arose in His resurrected body still bearing his wounds. Like Christ, we are embodied and meant to follow his example, awaiting our own resurrection at the Second Coming.

To move on, we Orthodox Christians are used to literature which encourages "remembrance of death" to keep us moving in life, and even our Orthodox Christian evening prayers remind us to ask "...will my bed be my coffin?"



It seems that people are more open to thinking about the details of their repose than a few decades ago when it was considered rather morbid.

BRUCE: Yes, most of the conversations I have are very positive, and many people are also quite dissatisfied with the ways in which this culture has assigned the duty of Christian burial to strangers.

RTE: Bruce, as art director for *Road to Emmaus*, you are the "man behind the curtain," and for fifteen years you've given us these classical, elegant layouts that showcase our conversations. How is your personal style as a graphic designer reflected in the design of your coffins?

BRUCE: My design philosophy is to strip away anything unnecessary, to get to the essence. The design of the journal is also like that—very classic and uncluttered with no unnecessary decoration. The design of the casket is similar, a very simple beautiful box. I've even selected the wood—straight-grain fir—to reflect this simplicity, and it is covered with a clear finish, no stains or dyes.

The handles and crosses decorating the casket are simple as well. At this time we have five cross designs: several Orthodox and Latin crosses, and we will soon add a Celtic cross and a Maronite cross. The crosses are pow-



der-coated aluminum with a bronze finish. Solid bronze would be too costly for most people, but these are very nice looking and you can't tell they are aluminum.

For Jewish burials the Star of David is made of walnut wood. We did it in walnut because in strict Jewish tradition the casket can't have any metal in it. After talking to a number of rabbis we understood that now only the most conservative congregations follow this absolutely, while others are fine with our minimal hardware.

RTE: Please tell us about the products and services you provide.

BRUCE: We currently have one model, one size. We hope to soon add a second model that will be a bit larger than the first. The thing that makes our caskets unique is that they are built to assemble easily so that they can ship flat and store flat. Also, we don't have a lining in our coffins. Linings are often used to cover up poor craftsmanship, but this wood is so beautiful that there is no reason to line it. Our caskets come with a muslin covered pad and pillow for the bottom. The hardware handles are double bolted inside and out to insure that they are secure. Our casket lid currently follows the Orthodox tradition of a single-piece lid, but we also hope to offer a split lid in the future, as some Christian churches like to take only the top half off for viewing.

RTE: What is it about wood that is at once simpler and more dignified than the artificially manufactured materials that many caskets are made out of today?

BRUCE: There are some elemental things in life that have a natural connection for people. Wood, fire, stone, all link to the human spirit.

RTE: What is it like to work on a casket? Do you pray for the person you are making it for?

BRUCE: Well, I don't make them individually now, so if I pray it's just in general. But working on caskets is very much like working on liturgical furniture, because both of them have a connection with eternity. Building liturgical furniture or caskets to be used by a family to bury their loved one in is deeply satisfying. Making things around the house doesn't have the same draw. The funerals for which I've built the casket have been deeply meaningful and I can't think of any better way to use my gift for the community.

RTE: Two reasons why many of us might balk at buying a casket through the mail would be the shipping costs and the question of where we would store it? You've already mentioned that these are shipped flat. Do your customers have to nail it together?

BRUCE: The assembly doesn't require nails, glue or woodworking knowledge. We use specialized hardware that is already embedded in the wood and simply locks together using a simple hammer or rubber mallet. The handles can be attached using a manual screw driver or an electric drill. All of the screws fit into pre-drilled holes so there is no drilling of holes needed. To attach the

lid before burial, we provide both screws and the old-style square cut nails that have been used for centuries. Each family has a choice of which to use. There's no guesswork because again, the holes are all pre-drilled. Also, keeping the boxes flat and within UPS size specification keeps shipping costs down. The volume of an intact full-size coffin would make shipping quite expensive.

RTE: Speaking of work that transitions to eternity, I think that your next step should be to add cradles. I'd like to see you involved at both ends of life.

BRUCE: We are already trying to see what we can do with the beautiful left-over wood.

RTE: What kinds of things can people read if they want to think about doing more natural burials? Although Orthodox Christians are usually buried in a consecrated cemetery, some may wish to bury their loved ones without professional help in a more natural setting, perhaps on their own property.

BRUCE: I would recommend the book, *"A Christian Ending: A Handbook for Burial in the Ancient Christian Tradition,"* by Deacon Mark and Elizabeth Barna. There is also an organization called Funeral Consumer Alliance, which has a lot of good information. We have links to these sites on our website. States vary in their regulations, but many do allow private burials.

RTE: In ending this, is there anything else you would like to say?

BRUCE: We are trying to provide caskets for families in a more personal way. We aren't in this to make a lot of money (although if that happens, I won't complain). We really want to provide a place where someone can buy a casket for a loved one, not spend a small fortune, and know where it came from. ✦

You can reach Bruce Petersen and Trillium Caskets at www.trilliumcaskets.com or by calling 503-420-8613.

You can see more of Bruce's liturgical furniture at www.brucepetersen.net/bwp_home.html.