

Sunday March 18, 2012

Using or wasting water resources

By Jim Taylor

In the shimmering heat haze, a water jug swayed towards me through the head-high grass. As it drew closer, I realized the jug rode on the head of an African woman.

This was how this village got water. The elders knew not to build their villages around their water source, to reduce diseases. So the village women spent most of each day, walking to the spring and back again, carrying a few litres of water on their heads each time. It was all their families would have for that day – for drinking, cooking, and washing.

Each jug carried less water than we use in a single toilet flush.

I was in Malawi, an impoverished country in south-central Africa. Older readers may remember Malawi as Nyasaland, where David Livingstone established his first, and most successful, Christian colony.

Malawi, strangely enough, has lots of water. Lake Malawi, the third-largest lake in Africa, empties into the Shire River, which flows through the densely populated southern lowlands to swell the mighty Zambezi.

But all that water is inaccessible to most of the country. It lies in the bottom of the ancient Rift Valley that splits the continent. Most of the country is a dry plateau 2,000 feet higher. Water runs down, not up.

In the industrial world, we use expensive technology to move water to places that need it. Only about 10 per cent of the Colorado River reaches the Gulf of Mexico; the rest goes to Phoenix and to California's Imperial Valley. The fabled Jordan River is a muddy shadow of itself by the time it reaches the Dead Sea, so much water has been taken for irrigation. The Soviet Union diverted so much water from Asia's Aral Sea that the enormous lake has almost completely dried up.

Countries like Malawi can't afford that kind of technology.

Water is not a global issue

We're accustomed to being deluged by global problems. The Canadian economy is joined at the wallet with those of the U.S., China, India.... Debris from the Japanese tsunami a year ago will soon litter Canadian shores.... Climate change – regardless of what causes it -- knows no national boundaries....

We tend to think of water problems the same way.

But as Charles Fishman points out in an article in *The Rotarian* magazine, water is almost always a local or regional problem.

"Journalists and activists talk as if the water problems of Delhi and Bangkok, of Atlanta and Las Vegas and Mexico City, were all part of a sweeping set of interrelated issues, like the global recession," he writes. "With water, that's a mistake...."

Because flushing my toilet less often here in B.C. won't provide one drop more of water for that woman in Malawi. Conservation efforts -- a low-flow shower head, not washing my car or watering my lawn, or bathing once a week -- will certainly benefit local supplies. But it won't make any difference in Africa.

Water must be available where people live.

Local or regional solutions

In Malawi, aid agencies wisely concentrated on local projects. A few sacks of cement enabled one village to protect their precious spring behind a concrete wall.

In another village, a borehole and a simple hand pump brought fresh water right into the village.

Another village lay some five miles from 10,000-foot Mount Mulanje. The cloud that often wreathes its peak condenses in droplets on the rocks. Tiny trickles turn into streams. Left untouched, the streams soon dry up in the arid plains.

But these villagers captured the stream behind a small dam. They dug a five-mile trench, by hand, to their village. They laid pipe from an international aid group in the trench. Clear cold lifesaving water gushed from a tap.

The first step in development

“Clean reliable water,” writes Fishman, “is the foundation not just of health and convenience – it is the foundation of economic opportunity.”

We need two to four litres of water a day for health. But much of that water comes in our fruits, vegetables, even meats. It takes water to produce the wheat in our bread, the tomatoes in our salads, and up to ten times as much to raise a kilogram of beef.

In total, each North American uses over 400 litres of water a day.

If that woman in Malawi made five trips a day to the spring, her family would still have barely five litres per person.

But with even small improvements, the villages I visited in Malawi suffered fewer waterborne diseases. The people could improve their hygiene, and thus their health. They could irrigate a few vegetables, for better nutrition. The seedlings they planted could grow into a woodlot supplying firewood and building material.

The women now had time for education, for starting micro-businesses, for opening a stall at local markets...

World Water Day, March 22, asks us to consider how we use – and how we waste – our water resources. Wherever they are. How does your water use compare to the women in Malawi?

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YOUR TURN

Tom Watson in Guelph had personal experience of the robocalls I wrote about last week. Tom writes, “I live in a condo in which a polling booth — to serve the residents of our building plus two or three other neighbouring buildings — is always set up. I was on my way to vote at the polling booth on the first floor when I received one of those robocalls. The call said that due to heavier than expected voter turnout our place to vote had been changed. ...

“I tried to phone the number shown by Caller ID. Non-existent. So I called the local Elections Canada office and learned that several other people had already phoned in. I added my name to the list and then went down to the first floor to vote. The robocall was already the topic of conversation among folks waiting in line to vote.

“I read now that the robocalls seem to have frequently directed to seniors. Our building and the others served by our polling station contain about 90% people of the senior age category.

“Two weeks ago a former staff member for the local PC candidate resigned, indicating his involvement in the robocalls. Did he work alone or was he part of a method directed by others? That is not yet known but, regardless, the whole thing stinks.”

Freda Stewart wrote, "I think you brought sense to the robocall issue. Like you, I use the delete button a lot, don't answer phone calls I don't recognize."

But she doesn't denounce the Harper group: "The grunge media will always try to find a bigger stick to beat Stephen Harper, refusing to recognize that he won the election because the majority of Canadians were fed up with the other parties. Funny about politics... last spring Montreal relatives actually apologized to me -- an Alberta Conservative -- for voting New Democratic as they saw it the only way to get rid of the Bloc! Of course the better way has already occurred -- cut the welfare payments to the parties, which was classic vote buying. Now they again have to seek our support."

Cliff Boldt seems to share my sense that Dean Del Mastro's defence of Conservative actions sounds like a pre-recorded message. Cliff quoted George Bernard Shaw: "'The power of accurate observation is commonly called cynicism by those who have not got it."

To which might add Shakespeare's line (more or less): "Methinks he doth protest too much..."

Isabel Gibson wrote, "Thanks again for the historical perspective you offer (there was some rationality behind the old law that kept beer parlours closed until after the polls closed. Not to keep drunks from voting, but to make it harder to buy/sell a vote for a drink.) We must keep pushing back on electioneering behaviour that crosses the line of legality and morality. We must also retain common sense and skepticism about the first-blush reporting of possible infringements."

Bill Peterson described a recent cartoon he saw, that put a twist on robocalls. It "showed house resident peeking out a window at a person at the front door ... and the caption is -- 'As if they couldn't get more annoying -- it's a door-to-door marketer!'"

In the same sort of vein, John Hatchard sent a letter purportedly from Rick Santorum, in which he promised to repeal everything since the Renaissance.

Clare Neufeld didn't fully agree with my suggestion that it would make no sense to launch robocalls in ridings where one candidate expected an overwhelming majority: "A well designed scheme will always have some sort of deniability factor incorporated. If I were a conspiracy theorist, I would anticipate that there would be such calls in 'safe' ridings, for exactly the effect your query represents."

ABOUT MY BOOKS, ETC.

Sorry, I have no more copies of "Seeing the mystery" available any more. Please do not send any more cheques.

QUESTION FOR YOU

About half of you, maybe more, used to subscribe to Ralph Milton's "Rumors" e-zine. Each week, he published one of my psalm paraphrases, matched to the lectionary recommendation for the following week.

Would you like me to start including those psalm paraphrases in these weekly newsletters? And if so, how far in advance? Is one week enough?

If you would NOT want them (e.g., don't use them, too much to read already, etc.) please let me know that, too.

TECHNICAL STUFF

This column comes to you using the electronic facilities of Woodlakebooks.com.

If you want to comment on something, send a message directly to me, at jimt@quixotic.ca.

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You can access several years of archived columns at <http://edges.Canadahomepage.net>.

I write a second column each Wednesday, called Soft Edges, which deals somewhat more gently with issues of life and faith. To sign up for Soft Edges, write to me directly, at the address above, or send a note to softedges-subscribe@quixotic.ca

PROMOTION STUFF...

If you know someone else who might like to receive this column regularly via e-mail, send a request to jimt@quixotic.ca. Or, if you wish, forward them a copy of this column. But please put your name on it, so they don't think I'm sending out spam.

For other sources worth pursuing, try

- David Keating's "SeemslikeGod" page, www.seemslikegod.org;
- Alan Reynold's weekly musings, punningly titled "Reynolds Rap" -- reynoldsrap@shaw.ca
- Isobel Gibson's thoughtful and well-written blog, isabel@traditionaliconoclast.com
- Wayne Irwin's "Model T Websites." a simple (and cheap) seven-page website for congregations who want to develop a web presence <<http://www.modeltwebsites.com>>
- Alva Wood's satiric stories about incompetent bureaucrats and prejudiced attitudes in a small town are not particularly religious, but they are fun; write alvawood@gmail.com to get onto her mailing list.
