

Knickers in a Knot

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

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Sanitation Station (Mexico City Metro) © Rod E.S.Q.

Growing up, I was always curious about how things worked and how people figured out how to make these things. So, I got into the habit of asking my dad about how things were invented – and who thought these things up.

I have fond memories of sitting in the back of the car while he was weaving through traffic, or during a long road trip, and asking about anything that piqued my interest. How does velcro work? And who came up with it? How do people get in touch long-distance over wires? And what is this Nobel Prize I keep hearing about?

My dad told me the stories behind these, and many other things. I learned of Swiss Engineer George de Mestral, and how he noticed that whenever he went out hiking in the alps, little burrs would get stuck to his clothes. And how he then wondered if he could learn what was behind it so that we could put things together, but also be able to pull them apart as needed – the hook-and-loop fastener was created!

I learned about Samuel Morse, and the telegraph's use of electric circuits and switches to send messages over long distances. I even learned a bit of Morse Code.

He even told me of Alfred Nobel's quest to make nitroglycerin safer to handle, eventually creating dynamite, and how – perhaps regretting that he made a fortune from this explosive – Nobel set aside his money to reward world-changing scientific and intellectual achievement.

As I learned all these fascinating stories and facts, I eventually started wondering about other complicated mechanisms. Cars and internal

combustion, electric motors, and things like, how does the water in the toilet flow down when you flush it, but then stops and stays in the bowl?

I wondered about this latter one for a very long time, and as I grew up, I realized that I somehow never got around to asking him about toilets as a kid. Of course, at some point I knew how to conduct my own research to my questions, and I did eventually learn about the magic of the [S-curve](#) in pipes and plumbing, and how this air-tight water-plug keeps the bathroom from smelling like a sewer.

But I also wondered... what kept me from asking my dad about this? Looking back, I can't imagine that he would have been anything but enthusiastic about explaining the mechanism of flush toilets. But something held me back... maybe I felt embarrassed about asking something relating to bodily functions. Perhaps somewhere in my interactions with friends, or with family, I had picked up a message that this was something you don't really talk about. I didn't know the word for this, but I now know that we call these kinds of things *taboo*.

Last week, I talked about a few life-saving advances in medicine, like insulin, vaccines, and antiseptic practices such as handwashing, which have shaped the landscape of our health – and of our civilization.

And among all of these advances, toilets remain underrated in just [how important](#) they are in building and maintaining the societies that we have come to know, and the benefits that we may find in living in communities that have consideration for sanitation. Just like the other advances that get lauded and celebrated, winning Nobel Prizes, and which are commemorated on our money and our stamps, toilets are also a *life-saving* technology that keep us healthy, bring us safety, and make financial security likelier.

But we rarely talk about them because they deal with... squishy and smelly stuff. Stuff that we'd rather keep out of our mind most of the day – except for those few times during the day, when we are obligated to acknowledge it.

And this silence can be deadly. Keeping it at the... bottom of our priorities when we think about social development, equity, safety, and health.

And while most of us can go about our days without having to think about it, each of us can probably also recall those days when... the plumbing is not working right. Only then, do we remember how life-changing, and fundamental, the convenient water closet is to life as we know it.

The harsh reality is that a life without ready access to a toilet is an everyday reality for about a third of the world population. In great part, this includes many populations in impoverished and rural areas that, due to a variety of social, economic, political, and even geographic factors, have not had the opportunity to establish this fundamental infrastructure.

And we're not only talking about far away places either. There are also many people in our country who don't have reliable access to working plumbing, toilets, sanitation infrastructure, or even clean water. Many of us are growing in awareness that many reserves for First Nations cannot offer adequate living conditions, due to colonial policies and practices, and this can include substandard sanitation.

In our cities and towns – right down the street from many of us – people who are homeless and precariously housed often lack reliable access to toilets. Over the last two years, this has been compounded by the effects of the pandemic, as publicly-accessible bathrooms in private establishments have at times been literally barricaded – you might have seen that if you'd gone into a coffee shop in the spring and summer of 2020, and perhaps a few other times since.

In fact, it may well have happened to you during a recent outing, that toilets were not nearly as available as you'd been accustomed to – a realization that has a bad habit of emerging at very inconvenient times.

The fact that this is an everyday reality for many people around the world has serious implications for individual and collective well-being. It brings serious public health risks like the spread of cholera, diphtheria E.coli and many other pathogens. It is dangerous – particularly for many women and girls, who sometimes need to step out into the night to take care of their bodies, at great personal risk; and it is costly, both in terms of lives and in terms of economic outlook for individuals and economic output for societies. A lack of toilets for everyone is an irrational reality. It is an absurd reality. It is an expensive reality.

Investing in sanitation and creative solutions, on the other hand, can bring great dividends, sometimes in unexpected ways. When I mentioned at a recent meeting that I'd be talking about toilets today, a colleague shared that he and his wife once visited the mayor of Battleford, Saskatchewan, and they noticed that the mayor happened to have a toilet sitting in the middle of his office...

When they asked what that toilet was doing there, the mayor explained that the town had been considering a prohibitively-costly expansion of water and sewage infrastructure, but when they learned about the highly water-efficient Caroma toilets that were in use in drought-stricken Australia, they realized that they could instead invest a fraction of that money in providing toilets with a lower water demand to the town, and still meet their water needs. Smart investment in toilets is investment in communities.

The greatest gains, of course, are the benefits to human lives. The health advantages and the convenience of easy access to toilets, can sometimes mean the difference between poverty and prosperity, by opening up space and time for educational and economic opportunities.

For this reason, many organizations have made toilets and sanitation a priority. The [World Toilet Organization](#) championed this advocacy and the observance of November 19 as World Toilet Day, and the United Nations took the cue and adopted this awareness initiative. Water

security organizations, and development banks have also included this matter in their agendas. The topic may offer some comic... relief, but it is a serious matter, as it encompasses the gamut of human rights and dignity.

In our own congregations and surrounding communities, we are also growing in awareness that toilets and bathrooms, and who has access to them, can have implications on dignity, safety... sometimes life and death. We know that this is a delicate matter for trans folks, who may be in danger as bathrooms are gendered in a way that does not take into account the risks that come when trans identities are ignored. The bathrooms in our own building happen to be gender-inclusive and this hardly strikes us as odd, yet even single-stall bathrooms in many public spaces are gendered without any reasonable justification beyond habit.

My friends, this conversation begins at home. It begins with encouraging our family and friends to grow beyond the learned embarrassment around the topic of toilets and bodily needs – even if it's squishy, sticky, or smelly.

My friends, this conversation belongs in our immediate and wider communities. Awkwardness on the topic aside, the lives of many of our neighbours are at risk, and their dignity is at stake.

My friends, this conversation belongs in the world, even when it's uncomfortable. The silence can be deadly – bearing witness can make the difference for affirming life.

May we have that conversation.
So may it be,
In Solidarity and faith,

Amen

*Suggested Hymns:***Opening Hymn #288 All Are Architects**

~)| Words: Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, 1807-1882

~)| Music: Thomas Benjamin, 1940- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

WOODLAND

Hymn #123 Spirit of Life

Words & music: Carolyn McDade, 1935 © 1981 Carolyn McDade

~)| harmony by Grace Lewis-McLaren, 1939- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

SPIRIT OF LIFE

Closing Hymn #124 Be That Guide

~)| Words: Carl G. Seaburg, 1922-1998, © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

~)| Music: Thomas Benjamin, 1940- , © 1992 Unitarian Universalist Association

WOODLAND