

To: CDT

A Visceral Relationship with Water

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Recently, as I lie in bed restless, awaiting sleep, I heard a soothing sound--the first soft taps of raindrops outside my bedroom window. My worries lifted and I felt comforted. Why is it that rain, especially at night, has this comforting effect?

I am not sure but I have an idea. Rain--water--is mostly what we are. Our bodies are 60% water. You and me--the trillions of cells in our bodies--bathed in 40 quarts of water. Water, the universal solvent, acts as a wonderful medium for cellular processes.

Early in our lives, our relationship with water is especially intimate. In the most intimate of human acts, spermatazoa are set free in seminal fluid to swim their way toward a female egg. Once fertilized, the embryo floats in a primeval salty sea of amniotic fluid. We even sprout gills during our early development in a recapitulation of our aquatic origins.

Each day we cycle 2.5 quarts of water from our bodies back to the earth--some leaves in the air we breathe out, some evaporates as sweat, and some as fluids and solids that leave our bodies. And each day the earth reciprocates as 2.5 quarts of water enters our bodies.

Since being reminded of the calming effect of the rain that restless night, I have been paying closer attention to water and in the process I have made two small discoveries

The first discovery was triggered by a question my daughter posed. She was washing dishes with the water going full blast and asked if it really mattered how much water she used. After all, she reasoned, water is a renewable resource and we have plenty here in Central PA. She had a point but she wasn't seeing the big picture. Each quart of water running down the drain has to be pumped from the ground, run through a filtering & purification system and then pumped up to holding tanks before emerging at our faucet. And this is only the halfway point of the journey. Each quart also has to go through a series of waste water treatment processes. The point is this: There is a lot of machinery, a lot of energy, a lot of chemicals necessary to deliver and process that water. When we waste water, we waste the machinery, energy and chemicals, each with its own ecological footprint.

The second discovery came when I began to pay attention to bottled water. On the surface, bottled water seemed like another one of life's wonderful conveniences. Grab it at the Minimart and pop it in your backpack. But here, too, I realized I was failing to see the big picture. An article in the Summer 1999 issue of the Amicus Journal first caught my eye. It described a study by the Natural Resources Defense Council to test 103 brands of bottled water. About one third of the bottled waters violated state or industry standards for chemical or bacterial contaminants in at least one sample. While most of the products tested were of good or decent quality, they were often not, as most consumers assume, significantly better than tap water.

I find a disturbing irony in the current bottled water craze. We citizens buy bottled water so that we can imbibe something pure but in the process we pollute our

larger environment. The plastic bottles are petroleum products; the factories that make the bottles use fossil fuels; the trucks and planes that transport the bottles use fossil fuels; the disposal of the bottles entails the use of yet more fossil fuels. And so once again, it is by looking up and downstream that we come to see the big picture--a picture of impacts.

It is heartening to note, though, that here in Central Pennsylvania we are slowly coming to see ourselves as embedded in a water system--the Spring Creek Watershed, part of the Chesapeake Bay drainage basin. But we still have a good ways to go. Yes, it is important to install water saving showers and composting toilets but even more fundamental as to cultivate the a profound mindfulness of our place in the water cycle. Donella Meadows says it best: "If we could see a watershed fully, we would treat water with as much reverence as our own blood, because that's actually what it is--the lifeblood of the planet and of all the creatures that live here, including ourselves."