

3-7-08

Do More Than Pray

Did you hear the one about the minister and the funeral? Well, the minister was new to the rural congregation and his first assignment was to pray at the burial of a homeless man. The funeral director explained that because there were no friends or family expected, it was actually a very important assignment and he hoped that it would be seen as a privilege to be given this opportunity. The new pastor was humbled and agreed. The funeral director also explained that the burial was to take place at a newly expanded part of the cemetery. The plot was into the woods a bit and, so, directions were given. Off went the pastor but, being new to the area and having come from the city, the winding country roads confused him and he realized he was going to be late. Being a typical man, he did not ask for directions and he was, in fact, an hour late.

When he arrived he saw the backhoe and the crew, who were eating lunch, but the hearse was nowhere in sight. The minister apologized to the workers for his tardiness, and stepped to the side of the open grave, where he saw the vault lid already in place. Assuring the workers that he would not hold them up for long, he requested the workers to gather about, as this was the proper thing to do. The workers looked at each other, shrugged in agreement and, still eating their lunch, formed a semi-circle. The minister began to pour out his heart and soul.

A few "Amen's" and "Praise be's" were respectfully expressed as the workers continued eating. After much heartfelt preaching, the minister concluded with a prayer, closed his bible, thanked the workers, and began to leave. As he was getting into his car, he overheard one of the workers say, "I've heard moaning and I've seen weeping. I've even seen celebrating! But I've never seen anything like that before. And I've been putting in septic tanks for more than twenty years!"

Well, that might be a humorous story but the truth is that each year at his time, many people are, in fact, praying that their septic system will last, that it will not overflow, that it will not back-up, that the neighbors will not complain of odors, that town sewerage will come, that, if they have to repair, it won't be one of those ugly mounds. While prayers can help in some situations, I don't have any reason to believe that it will help your septic system. If it is healthy, take good care of it. If it is failing, take even better care of it and plan for the future.

Why are people saying more prayers right now? This is the high water time of year. The ground is saturated with melting snow and the beginning of spring rain. If the leaching area was installed pre-1995, it might have been built in the seasonal high groundwater. In that case, the effluent has nowhere to go when the ground is soaking wet. (In 1995 we started using soil science and learned about the marks left by seasonal high groundwater instead of looking for water itself.)

If the system was not installed in the groundwater, perhaps it was not properly taken care of in ways that would prevent harm to the living organisms there. That's right; living organisms requiring care, right there in our septic systems! Our septic systems are a living, breathing organism very much akin to our body's gut. If you have ever taken an antibiotic, you probably

discovered the wisdom of eating yogurt, and other “pro-biotics”, for antibiotics kill not only the bacteria causing our, say, sinus infection or Lyme disease, but they also kill our beneficial bacteria.

With this in mind, please understand that there is a short list of what your septic system needs and a long list of what it doesn’t. It needs air. It needs the good bacteria being supplied by your body when you use the toilet. (If you are healthy and have the good bacteria to give.) It will be harmed by chemicals, antibiotic soaps, too much bleach, paint (even watered down latex paint from washing those brushes) and left over medicines dumped down the toilet.

You must be wondering, just like that laborer at the installation/funeral, why we could go for so many years, even generations, and not hear about people praying that their septic system would somehow survive. There are two main reasons (at least that I am aware of). Septic systems used to be little more than deep holes into the earth, tapping into the groundwater. The cesspools functioned like toilets; the groundwater flushed them in and out, up and down. They functioned wonderfully but there was no treatment of the undesirable bacteria and viruses in the effluent. The groundwater was continuously contaminated. Keep that in mind if you are tempted to complain about 1995’s Title V’s changes in Massachusetts. Ditto for storm water management requirements. Just yesterday, I drove by a discarded, tipped-over engine oil bottle in the melting snow, pointing right at a catch basin. Catch basins drain directly to wetlands. They are designed to handle excess water. They are not intended as repositories of poisonous substances.

Secondly, we used to be able to say that if your body cannot ingest and digest it, then it does not belong in your septic system. However, we increasingly live in a world dependent on chemicals. Pharmaceuticals and personal care products are the latest and greatest as a groundbreaking research topic for septic systems. More on that in a future column and reasons for hope for those who are praying. There is new technology for reviving failing septic systems! It has to be used carefully and with supervision but it is receiving rave reviews.

In the meantime, if you are one of the hoping/praying segment of the population, call your local board of health or contact me at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us

Let’s talk. You’ll feel better and you will be informed.

Credit for “the minister and the funeral” story is given to Gary Craig’s EFT website. I hope “author unknown” does not mind.