

I suppose every neighborhood has one of those antsy kids, usually a boy, it seems, who gets into everything and his mother is always calling out his name in a variety of tones, from searching to screaming. When I was growing up in South Weymouth, it was Richard. Richard Kelly. His mother wasn't the only one losing her sanity and patience, for one of Richard's favorite activities drove me crazy, too. He was always finding baby wild animals and bringing them home, instead of leaving them alone. Well, one day, I found him with a whole nest full of baby birds. They were featherless and their eyes were still closed. I wasn't able to get the nest back where it came from, so, we did the best we could to feed them. As much as I would have preferred that the birds had been left alone, caring for them did offer the opportunity to observe the predetermined behaviors of these little beings who could not have had the opportunity to learn by observing life.

Feeding them was pretty easy, after getting some advice from the nearest Audubon Society on what to feed them. I discovered that as soon as the feeder's hand passed over the bird's head, the shadow could be seen through the eyelid and the baby bird opened its mouth wide and tipped its head back, making a racket of peeps that must translate as, "Feed me! Feed me! Feed me more! No, not that one! Feed me!"

It was after the feeding that I saw the most amazing thing. When those near-blind hatchlings had a full belly and needed to relieve their colon of its contents, they rise up onto their feet, they back up to the top of the nest and, with rear-end now tipping over the edge, they wiggle and expel that dropping. How had they learned that universal rule that we don't poop where we eat? I don't know. What I do know is that the species at the top of the food chain, the same one who is supposed to be the smartest, is still learning that lesson.

This is why some public health departments are called the department of sanitation. The basics are the most important necessities. Shelter from the elements, food that is safe to eat, drinkable water and a place for and a method of disposing of and treating sewage.

People used to know that if the food was running out, we needed to grow more or take a hike to gather more. People used to know that when our dumping area was full and the population had grown to the point that living and dumping areas were close together, it was time for at least some of the people to move. They knew their lives depended on the area being able to sustain their existence.

As the millennia marched by, people lost sight of their ancestors' wisdom. They thought they could outsmart nature with technology. They could bring in water from far away places so that their little city could become a bigger city. Los Angeles did this, so why not Brockton? In Massachusetts, there's even legislature announcing what was seen as the correctness and necessity of this action to bring water in from Halifax and Kingston to serve Brockton.

Too many people and not enough pipes to drain away the used water? Build more pipes and add pumps to distribute the sewage to treatment plants. Those treatment plants also required tons of water. If the treatment plants worked correctly and were monitored correctly, then perhaps the discharge of all that treated sewage into lakes and rivers and the ocean could be accepted by and absorbed by nature in a safe and manageable way.

That's a lot of ifs in that scenario. It did not and has not always transpired so smoothly. Some sewer pipes converged with street drainage, combining rainwater with sewerage. This is not a pretty sight during heavy rain events.

This brings us back to the concept of sustainability. We, the human species, will always need enough water to drink, enough clean air to breathe, enough land to grow our food, and enough space between where we eat and where we poop. If we don't have those necessary components of the minimum standards of habitation, then it must be time to take a look at where we are headed if we don't sit down and work on plans for the future.

Several years ago I attended a "visioning" meeting at the Plympton Public Library. It was so much fun and inspiring to converse about such things as sidewalks, a community pool and connections with colleges. Recently I learned that Halifax has revived its master plan committee. Yahoo! These are great starting points.

All towns need people to volunteer some time to serve on their boards and committees. Departments such as zoning and planning can be instrumental in creating walking and biking trails and safer intersections. These requirements or modifications to proposed development plans are points of negotiation with the potential of great rewards for the town being served. I, for one, am hoping to see public transportation for Halifax and Plympton. I want to be able to "just wave!" to catch that bus.

I can only hope that we can work together to achieve true sustainability or, at least, more sustainability. And if we don't? I don't really want to think about that nest full of you-know-what. Let's learn from those unseeing but very knowing hatchlings.

Cathleen Drinan is the health agent for the Town of Halifax, Ma. She is interested in your ideas for your town. What do you hope and envision? She can be contacted at 781 293 6768 or cdrinan@town.halifax.ma.us