

It's a momentous week in history and all I can think of is potty talk. By the time this is in print, we will know who is the next president of the United States and about half of the country will be thankful and the other half will be saying, "Oh, sh--!" But it's not the smear campaign tactics that caused this topic to be on my mind. Public health people are always cognizant of the importance of and the necessity of all things fecal-related. We just call it sanitation and boy, is the way the world is dealing with it now, ever in need of change.

It is unacceptable that every fifteen seconds a child dies of diarrhea. Those children are dying because of basic sanitation issues such as water supplies being contaminated by sewage.

It is unacceptable that while some parts of the earth do not have enough water, we spend money on little bottles of it, even though we live on top of and next to all kinds of water bodies. Our attitude toward our water supplies is so carefree that we use it to flush away that which we are taught to ignore: our poop and pee. We have grown so accustomed to this flush-and-forget way of life that it may have influenced our worldview. Out of sight, out of mind. There's plenty more water where that came from. After all, I see water everywhere, don't I?

Then there's the vocabulary. Sewer treatment plant. It treats the sewage. It gets treated and then it is all fixed up, right?

Although I knew that centralized sewer treatment is currently discouraged and onsite treatment encouraged, I figured that this was mostly due to the exorbitant costs involved with the first. Small backyard septic systems are basically a small-scale treatment plant. It uses water to collect and take away all the urine and fecal matter with the flush of a handle. The same collection method also handles all the grey water from your house's sinks, washing machines and showers. That's a lot of water! Current standards for design of your average household use of its septic system is 110 gallons per bedroom per day. This number is based on 55 gallons per person per day. That's a lot of water, too! We have become so accustomed to having as much water as we want that we forget that before pipes delivered water into our homes, people used three to five gallons a day. The easier it is, the more we use.

Don't get me wrong. I love having that water at my fingertips as much as you but I hadn't given much thought to other ways of approaching our use of water or our current standards on treating the water that transports all that bathroom stuff. I was at a conference last week, though and I was looking at a composting toilet in the exhibition hall. I got to thinking that I knew only one family who owned one. They don't have a septic system in their yard. They only have a tight tank. They purchased a composting toilet to help in them achieve their water conservation goals. When that tight tank is full, it needs to be pumped out at great expense. In the United States, people associate the cost of a composting toilet as some sort of last resort. Being nation centric, we forget that most of the earth does not have the luxury of turning on a faucet for an instant water supply. The rest of the world has had to think of other ways to handle their bodily waste. They also never got so out of touch with the ancient ways. An ancient way of thinking about human excreta, saw it as something useful. Necessity is the mother of invention and Mother said, "Don't waste it. Use it the solids as compost to enrich the soil and the liquid as fertilizer for the crops." As humans moved away from nature and toward manmade environments, they forgot the ancient wisdom and yet did not have the scientific knowledge to guide them in the engineering of waste management or the connection between disease and poor sanitation.

We haven't been thinking out of the box, or septic tank, because we haven't had to. There's a movement, if you will pardon the pun, a great movement, gathering strength and has the promise of being very satisfying. It brings with it a whole new approach and is accompanied by a whole new vocabulary. This new approach could be called "ecological sanitation". It looks to achieve

sustainable systems. The use of “No Mixing” toilets separates urine from fecal matter. Grey water is kept separate and is able to be reused more quickly and less expensively than when it is mixed in with all the disease carrying black stuff. Sustainable sanitation is actually a development goal of the United Nations. Old-fashioned methods of drying and/or fermenting can be used to kill off unwanted bacteria so that human waste can be used as nutrient rich humus.

While other countries such as many in Africa do not have enough water, the United States has plenty but it is stressed and troubled water. There initiatives to treat and reuse our so-called waste water, just as astronauts do when in space.

New ideas require getting used to.

In London, storm drain effluent poured into the Thames, which caused the years of 1858 and 1859 to be known as the Great Stink. Dr. William Budd commented on the historic nature of the event:

For the first time in the history of man, the sewage of nearly 3 millions of people had been brought to seethe and ferment under a burning sun, in one vast open cloaca lying in their midst. . . . Stench so foul we may believe had never before ascended to pollute this lower air; never before, at least, had a stink risen to the height of an historic event.

As a result, many societies suffered from diseases such as cholera before they learned to sepa

The contents are then trucked to a treatment plant where it is made safe enough to join nature again.

I had not given much thought as to whether or not there was

I'll be worried about the status of public health no matter who the president is.