

11-23-18 The Three C's of Public Health

Have you ever wondered if people's needs have changed over the millennia? After all, we've gone from living in caves and migrating to follow the food supply, with no immediately apparent means of communication over long distances, to living in buildings equipped with running water and heat, food that can be delivered to our door and the world at our finger tips, be those finger tips on phone screens or the computer's keyboard. Has anything really changed, though?

Our basic needs have remained the same and many of them are now the responsibility of the local board of health. At a minimum, we need shelter offering protection from the elements, food, water, air and safety. It seems to me that people of very, very long ago had easier choices when it came to their needs. If the elements were not suitable, they moved on. If the food supply was low, they moved on to where there was more. The more we are invested in a location, however, the more difficult it is to divest ourselves of it and just up and leave. And even if we can leave and want to leave, where do we go? I can't help but wonder where all the foreclosure people go. How can they possibly afford the rent prices I see advertised? Where do you go when you don't own?

I guess the whole earth, every square foot of it, is now owned by somebody. Isn't that a strange concept? One of my sisters was forced to learn that concept several decades ago when she trooped into the woods with children to cut down a Christmas tree, only to be met by the police on her way out. When asked what she was doing and if she owned that property, she explained that she was just cutting a tree and that it was only woods; it didn't belong to anyone. Ha! That's a funny family story now.

While ownership may place barriers and boundaries interfering with our freedom of movement and actions, we are still confronted with the sharing of this earth. In fact, the more dependent we are on our circumstances, our finances and our commitments, the more we find ourselves dependent on our neighbors and our local government for assistance and guidance. These thoughts were confirmed when I watched an old movie recently. It was exhilarating to watch the story unfold and see that while bureaucracy, red tape and apathy existed then as now, that people could find solutions, could help one another and that individuals can make a difference.

The movie is called, "*Ikuru*", meaning "to live" and was directed by Akira Kurosawa in 1952. The main character, Mr. Watanabe, is a government official in post war Japan, plodding along, stamping his papers

all day long without any sense of connection to his community and unappreciated by his son and daughter-in-law. It isn't until he learns he has a terminal case of stomach cancer that he decides to get involved and make a difference by moving along a previously ignored civic project, that of cleaning up and diverting a surface area of wastewater in order to create a children's playground.

While it is Mr. Watanabe who makes this project possible by creating the necessary link between the many municipal departments, such as sanitation, engineering, building, pest control, highway and more, it is the GOW who brought awareness to the necessity of it. GOW stands for Group Of Women. Of course, the activists could include men but, in the movie, it was women and I have seen similar groups in local government make a difference. Some may recall the particularly notable GOW who made a difference in Plympton some years ago.

This movie had terms near and dear to my heart. The GOW came to their local town hall complaining of swampy water, mosquitoes, raw sewage and sick children. They demanded that something be done but nothing was. They cried. They yelled. Nothing was done. They were herded from one department to another. That is, until Mr. Watanabe realized he had little time left and little time to make a difference.

Even at Watanabe's funeral, the various municipal departments attempted to take credit for the cleaned-up area and creation of the playground, that is until the GOW showed up. They wept in sorrow and in gratitude for the man who made a difference, for the man who not only listened but who also acted on what he learned.

While I watched this movie, I realized that some things have not changed, at least when it comes to public health. We need to care, communicate and cooperate. That was always the case and I suspect always will be.

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