

If you are my age or older, you must remember how ordinary a thing it was to take the trash out for burning. Except for the garbage, which was picked up by the garbage trucks and went to pig farms, anything that was combustible was brought to the back yard and tossed into an open steel barrel for burning. Some people (like my father) improved upon the barrel's ability to burn by placing it on cement blocks and cutting some vents in the bottom sides. Sometimes treasures were found in the bottom of the barrel among the ashes. One time I found a knife. It was an ordinary, smooth dining utensil, probably tossed into the trash by mistake. But there it was, shining back up at me as I looked down. Outdoors, it seemed to hold so many more possibilities than buttering bread. I salvaged it and began to explore the possibilities as I walked around the yard. Hmm...there was a little piece of bark protruding from one of the two young maple trees in our front yard. Maybe the knife could even it out. Oh, oh. A little more than planned for came off. What was that underneath? Smooth, shiny, moist wood was exposed by the stripped piece of bark. To the eyes of a five year old, the smooth wood was beautiful. Why not create more? And the activity of peeling away the strips of bark was absolutely mesmerizing, perhaps even more so than finger painting. As I stepped back to admire my work, my reverie was broken by the sounds of my mother screaming.

I was punished; the tree was miraculously saved by painting it and it stands there still to this day. The in-ground garbage pails are gone. The back yards don't have steel drums for burning trash. There are no incinerators in our cellars, either. Our "landfills" or "dumps" don't burn trash, either. We don't even bury trash anymore. All these activities are illegal. They are all banned because they polluted the air and the ground (except the garbage and that was just plain unsanitary). The smoke polluted the air with toxic fumes and with particulates. The particles carried by sooty smoke are so tiny that we breathe them right down into our lungs where they get stuck and clog and coat the cell linings.

Laws were created to save our lungs, save our earth and to protect our children. We can, with a permit, burn brush in late winter and early spring and we are allowed to have a fire for cooking food. Wood stoves are regulated and held to standards by EPA. We have come a long way when it comes to having a safer, cleaner world than when I was a five year old peering into the ashes. We can assume some of these achievements are in place around us because there are agencies to inspect and standards to be met. Maybe we have assumed too much and maybe we have forgotten how foul the air was fifty years ago, for now we sit around the fire-pit or chimenea and call it ambience.

Sitting around a small fire, adding twigs and poking the embers is fun, isn't it? Perhaps we are even hard-wired to enjoy a campfire. The safety and survival associations with fire have been instilled in us for at least thirty five thousand years. I suppose we are more motivated to survive than we are to be reasonable or considerate of others. As a species I think we are still working on those attributes. Maybe that is why Paul Revere thought it was very important for a board of health to have the ability to help people who were being harmed by the inconsiderate behaviors of others. Maybe Paul Revere came to realize that he could not predict all the particular ways that people might be rude and so he had better not list the particulars but, instead, cite the reasoning and

give it an inclusive name. He called the consequences of all the inconsiderate behaviors a nuisance. He gave a few examples such as noise, dust and odors but nuisances were not limited to those examples.

The “nuisance regulation” became Massachusetts General Law chapter 111 section 122. Paul Revere gave boards of health this very important law which not only enables a board to act on it, it also requires that a board act on it and find a way to make it cease or abate. Sometimes, when faced with the reality of fines or not enjoying their past activities at all, neighbors become reasonable and work things out. The Smiths enjoy their dirt bike riding in their backyard when the Jones family is out. The Jones family enjoys their backyard again and is grateful to the Smiths.

Many boards of health throughout the state are currently facing the challenge of responding to complaints of smoke from fire pits, chimneys and even from indoor fireplaces. I can think of at least three reasons why we are seeing an increase of this true nuisance and health hazard. One reason is that many people are avoiding the high cost of trash disposal by burning their rubbish indoors and outdoors. This practice can be spotted by the thick smoke and foul smell. Other than using some clean paper to start a fire of seasoned hard wood, the practice of burning trash is outlawed by EPA and fire regulations. A measure of our overall economic difficulties is the increase in underground wood burning boiler systems for providing energy. If green wood is used, the smoke is thick and under certain weather conditions the smoke hugs the ground, rolling along right where people walk and breathe.

The third reason so many people are complaining to boards of health about smoke in their neighborhood is the current popularity of outdoor fire pits. With outdoor rooms still rising in popularity, the end of these practices is not in sight. The magazine pictures make the scene look like the epitome of sophistication and fun. Of course, they don’t show people coughing or thick smoke rolling into the nearby neighbor’s yard and we don’t picture people using a little fire pit almost every single day for getting rid of a dozen cut trees. When we look at those magazine pictures of the perfect outdoor entertaining room, we don’t imagine people burning their trash, creating a foul smelling smoke that blows into their neighbor’s house.

The reasonable board of health will begin with education and will ask people to be considerate of others when burning. For those who refuse to be considerate, for those who burn stuff other than seasoned hard wood, there is at least Paul Revere’s nuisance regulation.

It is good to remember who we are and where we come from. While celebrating and protecting our rights, let us be more considerate of others than Cathy was of that maple tree.