

It's Personal: Musings on Living With Drought

Days and days of relentless blue skies and sunshine. Sometimes clouds bring a promise of rain, and I'm hopeful. If they darken, my expectations escalate. But then the sun predictably breaks through, and when the gray gives way to blue once again, I am disheartened. My spirits rise and fall at the whim of the heavens.

On those rare occasions when rain does come, it might bring a few measly drops, hardly enough to dampen the dry ground. Yet, even with its poor showing, the rain is all that exists for me. I am deprived and cannot focus on anything else. I feel myself smile and breathe in the distinct dusty odor given off as the droplets of water stir up the bone-dry soil. It's a hopeful smell a suggestion that things will improve.

In California we are currently living through the fourth year of what has been described as an unprecedented drought. With the record-breaking heat and months of no precipitation, with the Sierra snowpack at twelve percent of normal, California's lakes and rivers are shrinking, and her reservoirs are diminishing. In the San Joaquin Valley – central California's two-hundred-fifty-mile strip of rich farmland – wells are drying up, and many farmers are being forced to let their fields go fallow. Whole farming communities are without water.

In the midst of the dryness, spring wildflowers in the foothills of the Sierra unfathomably pop up out of the compressed earth. They adorn the fields and trails with color. Innately adapted to long periods of no rain, they are an inspiration for their resilience and their beauty. I smile at their defiance of the cheerless drought, and shake my head in amazement.

Four friends go on a wildflower walk. We are all urban transplants to the foothills; from Chicago, Los Angeles, and Pittsburgh. We like to think of ourselves as mountain folk, and we get pleasure knowing we have learned about the nature that surrounds us. We walk along a parched path. My friends are chattering about the flowers, naming them, comparing leaves and petals, remarking about the variety of color.

I try to engage in the conversation, but find myself staring at the unbearably blue sky. The air is cool and the mid-morning sun warms us. What a nice day, I hear someone remark. There's no such thing as a nice day when the sun is shining, I say. I am snappy. My friends stop talking and look at me. Their mood has changed. They are restrained. Yes, they agree, this is a scary time. We talk a few minutes about the drought and make note of the wildflowers that didn't make it this year. Then we continue along the road, and the animated wildflower talk begins again.

I feel a bit foolish, almost envious of their ability to *seize the day*, as they say. It occurs to me they might not want this worrywart on their future walks. I feign sociability. But I am unable to keep myself from glancing skyward, watching and searching, as if by doing so I might make a difference. Like a child, a part of me believes that if I wish hard enough, stare long enough, the rains will come.

Psychologists tell us that magical thinking is not uncommon during stressful periods such as severe drought. Believing in miracles or imagining that you can change outcomes with a wish or a plea can be comforting and, moreover, can help ward off the depression and anxiety that often take hold when we feel powerless. The rain dancer dances. The conjuror summons up a rainstorm.

Then the day comes when I think I detect a slowing down of the water flowing into my washing machine. My first reaction is, uh-oh, this is it. No wishing. No discussions with the sky. Just the mutterings in my head: How much more time do I have? If I have to drill deeper will the water hold out until the drillers can get to my property? That would be a year, minimum. They say that people are having to drill down two hundred and three hundred feet, sometimes more, in order to tap into California's dropping water table. At a cost of thirty to forty dollars a foot, will I be able to afford it?

Sometimes thoughts can lead to creative and positive places, but sometimes we are driven in an opposite direction. My initial response on that day, I would say, was in the latter category. My mind had turned bleak. Has someone been stealing my water? I've heard that this is happening all up and down the San Joaquin Valley and here in the foothills. Are my neighbors using too much water or tapping into my well?

I have a friend who lives on a very tight budget. For some time now he has been drawing seventeen gallons of water from my well every month as a way of helping stretch his limited income. Suddenly, at the prospect of my well running dry, his seventeen gallons seemed like too much. I began planning how I would tell him that he would have to stop taking my water. *My* water. How I would make sure he would not sneak onto my property when I'm not at home. *My* property.

I wasn't proud to glimpse my 'every-gal-for-herself' companion who so easily jumped onto the scene. But there she was with all her fear mongering and problematic suggestions. In my heart, buried deep under the gnawing fear, I knew I wouldn't act on these. But in my mind and in

my gut those seventeen gallons had become a premonition of doom as it struck me that I could no longer take endless water for granted.

The belief in a perpetual supply of water is being challenged on many fronts. On a recent Thursday night, for example, I was seated in a restaurant next to a party of four, two couples who, by the tone of their conversation, were probably close friends. One of the men picked up a sign from the table that read, *Due to drought in California, water served on request only*. “This is ridiculous,” he said, and tossed the sign back on the table. “How much are we talking about for a couple of glasses of water?”

I tried to imagine how many servers in California were pouring water for their customers at that very moment. How many glasses would be poured the next night, or the next? Every night. It didn’t seem like an insignificant amount. I wondered if the man had considered this when he scoffed at the restaurant’s policy. The man’s friends, who were reading their menus, looked up. “Well,” one of them remarked, “I guess they have to wash the glasses, too.” And they all sniggered and went back to their menus.

Now, for the most part, at a restaurant we can assume that we’ll receive a glass of water when we sit down at the table. Except for the occasional ‘no ice’ order, the ritual is fairly routine. But, in thinking about the reaction of the people at the table next to mine, it appears that even a token social amenity such as a glass of water can carry great significance, and its removal might feel like an infringement of some sort and, at least, an inconvenience. In this case, maybe a threat.

In the farmlands of the San Joaquin Valley, the challenge to the sense of entitlement to water has been going on for four years, and continues on a daily basis. “When my dad and I bought our farm forty years ago,” recounted Barbara Thormann, who grows oranges on

seventeen acres of land in the central valley, “the owner told us that we’d never have to worry about water because the aquifer for the farm was fed by the Kings River. He told us that it was like we would have a direct pipeline from the river to our land.” Barbara and her family felt water rich until the day when she visited the Kings River after losing one of her wells in the fall of 2014. She was shocked. “You could almost walk across the river,” she said. Barbara anticipates that she would never again be free from worrying about her well not making it. “I live with the constant feeling that I might have picked my last crop,” she said. “I know I’ll be all right if that happens, but it would break my heart to lose my trees.”

In the Sierra foothills there is no ignoring the drought. Even those of us who still have our wells must face the glaring evidence every day of a diminishing water supply. Besides the increasing number of wells running dry, we are seeing reservoirs dwindle, ponds disappear and creeks dry up. We are surrounded by mountainsides languishing for the want of water. As I drive around, whether along the two-lane mountain road to Yosemite National Park, surrounded on both sides by Ponderosa Pine and cedar forests, or on the last leg of my drive home, which takes me one mile east of the main highway with a full view of the foothills, I am stunned to see the proliferation of dead trees, masses of orange and brown forms poking up among the pine and cedars. It seems as if there are more every day, and it feels that they die overnight. I am told that we are only seeing the final evidence of trees that probably died over a year ago.

For urban users, the idea of diminishing water may still be an abstraction. Their water continues to come through their pipes. So it may take more time for them to step up and reduce their water use, even with the new mandated restrictions in place. Such local rules about when and what to water can fuel resentment. For city dwellers, groomed lawns and landscapes are a source of personal pride and the pride of neighborhoods. Their flower and vegetable gardens and

their fruit trees connect them with the nature they crave. Reducing water use can impact their lifestyle, their very identity. Even for those who are ready, it may take some time for them to let their lawns go brown and cut back on their gardens.

A sobering thought: If I had contemplated doing battle over seventeen gallons because of a perception of dwindling water – which, by the way, proved erroneous – what could we expect if this drought were to slog on for years, as is predicted? What kinds of conflicts will we see as more and more farmers are unable to irrigate their land, more and more rural homeowners find their wells slowing down, and more and more city folk are asked to turn off their dishwashers and let their lawns and gardens go?

“I’m sure it’s going to get ugly,” Barbara confided. We were riding in her tractor, talking about the drought. She was tilling one of her fallow fields, churning the overgrown brush and grasses into the dry ground. Around the field we went, cutting an ever larger swath of ploughed earth and crushed vegetation. The dry chopped up scrub lay in stark contrast to the lush orange trees on the adjacent field, the last cultivated grove left on the farm. “The next thing you know, they’ll be saying I’m using too much water to grow my oranges, and that’s why so-and-so down the street doesn’t have drinking water, that kind of stuff. All that’s coming.” Barbara knows of farms where they are digging down a thousand feet to find water. “It’s the big guys that have all the money that are able to do that,” she said. “It’s insane. We have no idea where this is all going. It’s all new territory we’re dealing with, and there are going to be some serious conversations about that, for sure.”

To state the obvious: Water is an essential natural resource for every person living on the face of the globe. And the not so obvious: Many countries worldwide are seeing their water

supplies shrink because of extended and severe drought. So what will happen when our natural dependency on water butts up against the diminished supply? There are predictions that water will become a more valuable commodity on the world market than oil. Can we expect wars will be fought over water? Price gauging, for certain, will occur. Already there are cases where farmers in the San Joaquin Valley are letting their fields go fallow because their profit margin is greater when they sell their water.

There goes gloomy Gus again, the worrywart. Is it time to stare at the sky? To wish? To dream? I think not. After I came face to face with the prospect of joining the ranks of the waterless, I began to read and talk and ask questions. In the months since my personal experience, I've read about people and talked to people who have lost their wells. I learned from them about resilience and hope and how these come with things like realistic planning, connection to others, about not being afraid to make face difficult choices, and to live with their consequences. I learned about community-minded actions by big-hearted people.

Like Donna Johnson, who organized the delivery of free bottled water over a period of months to hundreds of families living without water; and farmer Cannon Michael who, with a group of neighboring farmers, fallowed some of their fields and lowered their water use and, in doing so, made 4.4 billion gallons of water available at a reasonable price to their neighbors suffering from loss of their water and unaffordable water rates. Then there is the farming community of thirty families where all but two wells ran dry, and where the two fortunate households were sharing their water with their unfortunate neighbors. I could go on and on about the good works, the entrepreneurship, the creative thinking of people trying to negotiate the new circumstances we are facing.

But, it was an *LA Times* feature by reporter Diana Marcum that perhaps had the strongest influence in helping me redirect my negative thoughts and feelings. For me, reading the article was like going on an adventure, like taking a trip through the fragile, uncertain world of 32-year-old Adam Toledo as he contemplated the inevitable loss of his farm. I read and re-read the pages, and as I did so, I came to admire Adam's ability to think clearly, to not shy away from unpleasant realities. He seems to be able to make tough decisions, and not without a touch of humor. "You have to have a dog to be happy in this life," he declared. "I am in the field every day talking to [my dog] like a human. Telling him my worries."

Adam is a compassionate man, proud and of a generally positive nature, but who harbors a healthy dose of cynicism when considering the reality of his circumstances. "I held on a little longer than some," Adam had told his barber friend one morning at the barbershop. He explained that his well wouldn't last until the summer. "Only the richest will survive now," he added. When the barber became alarmed at the gravity of Adam's situation, and perhaps at having to contend with the gravity of the drought in general, Adam comforted him with a pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry," he told him. "It's Nature. There's nothing we can do about it." Then, upon leaving the barbershop, with a bit of magical thinking thrown in for good measure, he advised his friend to turn up the volume on the "praise music" that was playing on the barbershop radio.

On another note, in reading through the article, it occurred to me that every issue Adam confronted seemed to be filtered through his relationship with and in consideration of his family. "If I come home sad and my wife and my daughters are sad and then I act sad too," he explained, "what are we going to do? Have a funeral? No! So, what, we start over. As long as a person is breathing, there's hope."

When trying to decide whether to water his last alfalfa field, which draws on the same water supply as the house, he reasoned that he would let the field go. “Without water to irrigate, there’s no farm. But without water for the house, there is no life,” was how he reasoned it.

In the end Adam came to the conclusion that he would probably sell his property to an individual or an investment group. He predicted that the buyers would have the money to dig a much deeper well than is currently on the farm. They would plant pistachio trees and “maybe make a million dollars.” Adam expressed confidence in his family’s ability to pull themselves up. “I have hands and feet,” he said, “and I can work.”

He imagined taking his daughters back to the land in ten years. “Maybe it’ll be all green and nice and full of pistachio trees. I’ll say to them, remember when we were up here just trying – trying? There was a drought. It was part of your life’s adventures.”

Is this not magical thinking? Perhaps. But why don’t I feel gloomy and become preoccupied with the relentless blue sky and sunshine. Why am I not wallowing in fear? Because Adam has inspired me to look towards a positive future. Because I’ve been touched by his fortitude. I’ve come to see that my magical thinking and my fear were just two sides of the same coin, with loneliness at each pole. And in between is everyone else, friends and family, strangers who catch your attention and influence your thinking. So, yes, Adam was caught up in a kind of magical thinking. But I believe he will do exactly as he planned. I only wish I could be a fly on the wall to watch him as he shows his daughters where they came from and how they got to wherever they will be.