

VOICE OF SAN DIEGO

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All Water Is Wastewater



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Essay Contest

Finalist

Drinking sewage? The mind recoils against the thought. All the instincts of the human animal warn against the age-old danger of disease; all the habits of modern civilization are repulsed with sheer disgust at the association. No, no, never.

Maybe it'd be efficient. Maybe it'd be good for the environment. Maybe it'd supply water to as many as 180,000 people annually in an arid desert -- but come on, it's sewage! Yuck, yuck, yuck.

But the instinctive, impulsive reaction is really unreasonable. Wastewater would go through an extensive treatment process that would render it completely safe for consumption long before it would reach any homes. Before the system could be implemented, the city plans to have a year-long trial to make absolutely sure that it works, and they're required to get the approval of the state health department as well. In fact, the water from the purified sewage plants would be cleaner than that we get from the Colorado River and other drinking-water sources, which themselves often contain sewage and runoff from upstream.

The truth is that all water is wastewater. The earth is one large closed system which nothing can escape or enter; everything made of matter that we deal with is recycled. Physicists estimate that in every breath we take there is at least one molecule of air that was also in Julius Caesar's last breath. If the air in our lungs has been breathed many times before, then, as little as we like to think about it, the water that we drink has also been drunk many times before it reaches us. Unless, perhaps, we react elemental hydrogen and oxygen to create new water (not an economical proposition), we will inevitably be drinking sewage.

Nature purifies through evaporation and condensation, man through filters, reverse osmosis and disinfection, but the concept is essentially the same -- just sped up a bit.

Moderns really are exceedingly squeamish about the less-than-pleasant facts of life. We eat meat that comes in neat plastic-wrapped packages, divorced from the reality of the living animal, and vegetables pre-scrubbed to remove any offending

taint of soil. We put our trash on the curbs on Thursday night, and it vanishes -- out of sight, out of mind. We pretend to ourselves that water is something that comes out of a tap, and that what goes down a toilet or a drain disappears forever. This is not normal.

The vast majority of humans throughout history could scarcely dream of the conveniences we take for granted. The benefits of modern Western civilization are incalculable indeed, and no one in their right mind would trade the health, life span, and quality of life we have gained for a merely philosophical quibble. But the fact remains that we increasingly hide from ourselves the basic necessities of life, increasingly distance ourselves from the root realities of being. And also, this attitude, sustained for long periods of time, cannot help but affect our thoughts and actions.

For millions of years our ancestors drank from every flowing stream. It did not worry them that the water had touched dirt and stones, that animals had passed upstream. They drank where moss grew and minnows darted and tadpoles hatched, where livestock watered and boats passed. And yet -- somehow -- the human race survived.

We moderns are obsessed with cleanliness, far more than is warranted by health concerns; we don't just sanitize but sterilize the things we come into contact with. Ironically, our caution may actually backfire, like when we breed super-germs by imprudent use of antibiotics, or when people become sick because they have too few bacteria and their immune system, with nothing to do, begins attacking the body itself.

Recycling sewage might be good for us, not only in a practical sense, but a philosophical one. Certainly, the debate over the idea has people thinking about parts of life that we usually prefer to ignore. If we could increase and maintain that awareness, that consciousness, it would be valuable and eye-opening.

We need to remember the connectedness of all things, the interdependence between man and his world. With that knowledge closer to the front of the brain,

not pushed off and half-forgotten, we are more likely to act as responsible stewards of the resources around us, considering what it is we buy, drink, drip, pour, and flush away.

Thinking about sewage may also encourage an appropriate sense of humility. Yes, man is the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals, noble in reason, infinite in faculties, in "action like an angel, in apprehension like a god" (as Shakespeare says); but he is also a creature at times reduced to drinking its own sewage. Just think how some wealthy businessman or successful politician, tempted to the mortal sin of pride, might be saved by pouring himself a glass of water and chancing to reflect that not only is he is dependent day by day on the proper functioning of thousands of pipes and distant purification plants, but also that the substance that sustains his life has been used dozens of times before by others of lesser worldly stature but equal humanity.

The perception that drinking wastewater is gross should be no obstacle to using the water resources available to us in the most efficient way possible. Fundamentally, the issue is of self-deception. We only distinguish between disgusting reused water and fresh, pure tap water because we avoid thinking about where water really comes from and the processes it goes through, because we pretend that water comes from a tap. But thinking about the real and basic facts of our lives leads to sound philosophy and understanding. All water is wastewater. And it's always better to be aware of the truth.