



The Day the Water Died

By Ann Katzenbach

My perspective on life changed when our well went dry. When I say “our,” I am referring to a community of people—eight households and sometimes more.

Since having lived in the West Indies, with stored rain as our only source of water, I’ve never taken this precious commodity for granted, but we never ran out of water there. We got through every dry season and filled our cisterns when it rained again. Here we depend on water from the ground, water that’s running out.

When the water stopped, a

meeting was called. Some well users who’ve lived here a long time thought the well would recharge when the monsoons come. Those who understand the workings of wells thought it might be that the 30-year-old well was clogged up—that there was water but it couldn’t get through. While we investigated that possibility, everyone agreed that we should buy water.

One of the houses on this well is leased to The Tree of Life, and there can be as many as eight people living there at any given

time. Apart from the occasional use of that house, the well provides water for 19 people (adults and children)—taking showers, washing clothes, doing dishes, brushing teeth, and flushing toilets. The tank that once held well water is now filled by D&M Engineering. Elvino, the driver, takes about 4,800 gallons of water from the town pump and drives out here. The longest time between refills has been one week; the shortest, three days. Each time Elvino fills the tank, it costs \$180.00.

Living this way, I found my appreciation for water enhanced a hundredfold. I believed I was a thoughtful water user until it became an expensive commodity that affected my life day in and day out. For weeks, we saved shower water to flush the toilet when it really needed to be flushed. We saved dish water to keep our trees alive. Tooth brushing can be done with only half a cup of water if you’re careful. The two laundromats in town ate up all my quarters. We took really short showers because each time the call went out for water, I heard the “cha-ching, cha-ching” of the cash register. As I write this, it is still not clear if the community well is really dry. There have been well experts working on it (“cha-ching, cha-ching”) for several days without any noticeable success.

The biggest lesson I’ve learned so far is that community wells are fraught with difficulties as a result of issues of leadership, accounting, meter-reading, legal agreements, and the ugly chasm between the over-consumers and the drop-counters. With this clearly in mind, we decided to drill a well with our one neighbor—one well for two households.

We hired a douser and paid him a substantial fee to find out where there was water somewhere on the two properties. He told us that we would find a good flow of water 240 feet below the spot to which his forked branch pointed. He was wrong about the depth and the flow, but after 12 hours of drilling, we got water at 680 feet.

Drilling is a noisy, dirty job. It requires skill, alertness, patience and experience. When the dirt starts spitting out of the drill hole, it’s like a cannon going off. When the pipes start swinging through the air, you’d

better pay attention. When hours go by with nothing but clay and lubricating foam shooting out of the pipe, you need to believe things will change, and when you do find water, you need to know if it’s good or not-so-good and how much more to drill and how to cap it. It was dark when our crew finished up. We took banks of lights into the yard so they could work. There was exhaust smoke, cigarette smoke and the pounding of a diesel engine. It was like a movie set, only it was real, and we got good water, which I will never, never again take for granted.

I hope that in the future, every time I turn on a faucet, I will think of the long journey the water is making through the earth and remember how much it cost to get it.



Photo by Ann Katzenbach

The well-digging equipment at the writer’s home



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