

Research Note:
Are We Flushing Peace Down the Toilet?
Discipleship and Defecatory Justice

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In order for complex life forms to survive on planet Earth, people—especially those of us responsible for contributing to climate changes and benefiting from global inequality—must make significant transformations to how we live at a basic level. Human survival depends on access to water and food. We have rightfully given considerable attention to these essential human needs. But we have given far less consideration to the equally essential human need to release excess water and food from our system through urination and defecation. The line of research that I am proposing here seeks to address issues of disproportionate water usage, and the dearth of dignified, sustainable sanitation options and systems. Ecological sanitation is a neglected area of consideration for environmental innovators, and “defecatory justice” is a helpful framework to analyze the power dynamics at play when addressing climate issues.

WHAT IS DEFECATORY JUSTICE?

First, a word about language, since we often avoid conversations about sanitation because of social taboos around bodily waste. Children in Western cultures are taught not to use “bathroom words” in public. English does not even have a neutral word to use to describe the nutrients and leftovers that come out of the body.¹ The word “poo” is childish; “shit” offends people (though the word has noble roots²); and “feces” and

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1. “The Ethics of Sanitation” on *Jaltcoh* blog, Feb. 3, 2009.—<http://jaltcoh.blog.spot.com/2009/02/ethics-of-sanitation.html>.

2. “Shit comes from a family of words that also contains the Greek *skihzein*, the Latin *scindere*, or the Old English *scitan*, all meaning, sooner or later, to divide or separate.”—Rose George, *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why It Matters* (New York, N.Y.: Metropolitan Books, 2008), 11.

“excrement” seem too scientific for normal conversation. Our social conventions have discouraged us from talking about the reality of bodily elimination, thereby making it more difficult to address sanitation as an ethical issue or a matter of public concern, or for new ideas to be shared at every level of society where innovation could be happening. As a result, our social movements, institutions, and organizations, like our bowels, are often constipated. We need to get the flow going to be healthy.

The term I have created to describe the challenge humanity faces in this regard is “defecatory justice,” a concept still in development since I am just beginning to find interlocutors for this conversation.³ Defecatory justice is a theoretical framework that examines the power dynamics of all the interconnected systems related to patterns of human elimination and the subsequent journey of that expelled matter. It is both a theory and a practice. As theory, it works alongside other visions of justice in the service of collective liberation, planetary regeneration, and the adoption of pro-environmental behaviors. As a practical concern, it seeks to ensure that what comes out of our bodies remains within the natural cycle of decomposition.⁴

The argument that human “waste” should remain within the natural cycle of decomposition stands in opposition to the taken-for-granted wastewater treatment and septic processes familiar in many contexts in the Global North. These systems are problematic not because they have failed to help us resolve a perennial problem of separating human excrement from the places humans eat—they have. But modern wastewater systems enable fantasies of what it means to flush “away” human bodily waste. Away is a false notion; away is always *somewhere*—places where people and other beings are living. The ways that waste is treated frequently has a negative impact on others through the use of chemicals and the release the hazardous materials into freshwater and landfills. In addition, many of these systems are currently overwhelmed, creating a new set of problems for municipal public works departments.⁵

3. In recent research I came across David Waltner-Toews’s *The Origin of Feces: What Excrement Tells Us About Evolution, Ecology, and a Sustainable Society* (Toronto, Ont.: ECW Press, 2013). Waltner-Toews is a Canadian Mennonite author, veterinarian, and poet. I reached out to him; we connected and are already exchanging stories and contacts. Also, Shawn Shafter, an educator, artist, and performer affectionately known as the “Puru,” has traveled the world sparking conversations about the body, our poop, shame, and change.

4. There is much more that could be said, as well, of the other substances that leave us—mucous, blood, urine, spit, earwax, sweat—as well as what becomes of the body that will allow itself also to stay within the natural cycle of decomposition (e.g., by escaping embalming, using slow-degrading caskets, etc.). My initial research focuses on human bodies and human feces, though a defecatory justice lens could examine other issues, other species—and other feces—as well.

5. The introductory quote in Sim Van der Ryn’s *The Toilet Papers* deftly challenges the absurdity of our current “waste” management system. “The idea of waste, of something

In recommending that we pay attention to defecatory justice I am not suggesting that we abandon concern for other environmental issues. We can be attentive to more than one thing at once, and every issue is interconnected with other issues. But sanitation ethics should be included alongside other ethical concerns—access to dignified sanitation must be understood as part of a broader set of environmental justice concerns, including human rights, food security, and health initiatives.

Part of the aim of this research is to share the various ways that Mennonites can approach the emerging conversation about defecatory justice and ecological sanitation in order to integrate this conversation within a broader framework of discipleship and environmental ethics.

DEFECATORY INJUSTICE

Sanitation is one area in which the violence of interlocking systems of oppression is often unseen and routinized. Currently, some 2.5 billion people—particularly in the Global South—lack adequate sanitation facilities, while those in the Global North consume an excess of fresh-water in their sewage treatment facilities. According to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, one in three people have no stable sanitation facilities.⁶ This means people with no toilet, no bucket, no pit latrine, no port-a-potty, no box. Left untreated, open defecation nearly always breeds diseases. In many parts of the world, diarrhea—something people in the overdeveloped world usually consider a minor nuisance—is deadly. Over 2,000 children die of diarrhea each day.⁷ Indeed, diarrhea and subsequent dehydration are the second biggest killer of children under 5 years old worldwide, the source of more deaths than HIV, malaria, and measles combined.

The 2006 Human Development Report authors noted that “when it comes to water and sanitation, the world suffers from a surplus of

unusable, reveals an incomplete understanding of how things work. Nature admits no waste. Nothing is left over; everything is joined in the spiral of life.” Building massive systems on this incomplete understanding of how nature works is deadly.— Sim Van der Ryn, *The Toilet Papers* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Capra, 1978).

6. Millennium Development Goal 7 is to Ensure Environmental Sustainability. Access to clean water and sanitation is a sub-goal (7C): “By 2015, halve the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation” It reports, “with regard to basic sanitation, current rates of progress are too slow for the MDG target to be met globally. . . . The number of people living in urban areas without access to improved sanitation is increasing because of rapid growth in the size of urban populations.”— [https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/millennium-development-goals-\(mdgs\)](https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/millennium-development-goals-(mdgs)).

7. Li Liu, et al., “Global, Regional, and National Causes of Child Mortality: An Updated Systematic Analysis for 2010 with Time Trends since 2000,” *Lancet* 379 (2012), 2151-2161.

conference activity and a deficit of action.”⁸ The report pointed out that “the 1.8 million child deaths each year related to clean water and sanitation dwarf the casualties associated with violent conflict. No act of terrorism generates economic devastation on the scale of the crisis in water and sanitation.”⁹ “Every dollar invested in sanitation,” argues Rose George, “brings an average of \$7 return in health costs averted and productivity gained.” So if universal sanitation were achieved by 2020, it would cost just over \$95 billion but would likely save more than \$660 billion.¹⁰

Sometimes, people refer to diarrhea euphemistically as a “water-borne” illness. And many countries with sanitation issues spend a great deal of money on freshwater. NGOs prefer to focus on water rather than sanitation because the public image of freshwater flowing from a pipe is much more attractive than photos of toilets or latrines. Freshwater, of course, is vitally important; but without adequate sanitation, the freshwater supply quickly becomes contaminated by dirty fingers and feet. When human waste is properly channeled and treated, the risk of infecting drinking water sources is significantly reduced. But because people do not want to talk about excrement and urine there is less funding for innovation in this area. Indeed, sanitation has been the Millennium Development Goal furthest from its target.¹¹

The United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) has acknowledged that climate change most adversely impacts vulnerable populations, calling out the “protection gap” that leaves those who contribute the least carbon emissions most vulnerable to their negative impacts. Sanitation is another area where those of us in a protected class are having a disproportionately adverse impact. In the Global North our treatment of human waste is designed to fully separate the consequences of our mundane actions by the push of a button or the jiggle of a handle. But before thinking about this as simply an issue of making sure that “everyone has a toilet like we do,” it is worth asking whether or not that approach makes sense.

8. Kevin Watkins, et al., *Human Development Report 2006: Beyond Scarcity: Power, Poverty, and the Global Water Crisis* (New York: United Nations Development Program, 2006), 70.

9. *Ibid.*, 3.

10. George, *The Big Necessity*, 72.

11. WHO and UNICEF, *Progress on Sanitation and Drinking-Water: 2013 Update* (Geneva: WHO Press, 2013), 3. In 2015, the year by which MDG targets on sanitation were supposed to have been met, UNICEF and the WHO reported that “the world has fallen short on the sanitation target, leaving 2.4 billion without access to improved sanitation facilities.” — UNICEF and WHO, *Progress on Sanitation and Drinking Water: 2015 Update and MDG Assessment* (Geneva: WHO Press, 2015), foreword.

ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES OF CSOS

In many ways, the flush toilet was a brilliant invention. In 2007, readers of the *British Medical Journal* voted the toilet and the accompanying sanitation revolution as the best medical advance of the last 200 years, choosing it over surgery, antibiotics, or even anesthesia because of the impact that sanitation systems had on reducing disease and child mortality.¹² But the flush toilet and modern systems of sewage treatment hide a host of problems.

Normally, flushed toilets empty into sewer lines that meet at a wastewater treatment plant, where the sewage is treated and then discharged into a water body. But when it rains hard and sewage plants are overwhelmed beyond their capacity, many systems bypass the treatment plant and dump human excrement, roadway and field runoff, and industrial wastewater directly into our waterways in order to avoid sewage backup in residential homes. In many cities across the country “combined sewer overflow” (CSO) is the source of serious pollution. Rather than being forced to deal with what we have dumped, CSO systems are designed to push it all downstream. This has led to fish dying, *E. coli* contamination, and algae blooms, and has seriously compromised the health of rivers and those who live downstream. Most infamously it was a CSO cocktail of industrial waste that resulted in the Cuyahoga River catching fire in June of 1969.

Throughout the 1990s, CSO dumping into the ocean along the east coast had serious environmental consequences as well. Where I am studying in upstate New York for a PhD in religion and environmental science, Onondaga Lake was the most polluted lake in the country due to this toxic combination. The lake’s stench was detectable for miles around, and no fish could live there. The sacred medicine plants of the native Haudenosaunee peoples wilted along the shoreline. The people most impacted by these policies have organized for decades and refuse to be ignored. Due to their efforts places like Onondaga Lake, the West Atlanta watershed, and the St. Joseph River in Indiana are slowly being cleaned up.¹³

Finding water to make our combined sewer systems work is going to be more difficult in the coming years. It is already becoming more expensive. Currently, the federal Environmental Protection Agency is

12. Annabel Ferriman, “BMJ readers choose the ‘sanitary revolution’ as the greatest medical advance since 1840,” *British Medical Journal* 334 (2007), 111.—Retrieved from: <https://www.bmj.com/content/334/7585/111.2>.

13. See my chapter on the impacts of environmental racism and the advocacy effort to resist oppression in “An Ecological Beloved Community: An interview with Na’Taki Osborne Jelks,” in *Watershed Discipleship: Reinhabiting Bioregional Faith and Practice*, ed. Ched Myers (Eugene, Ore.: Cascade Books, 2016), 102-120.

requiring most, if not all, cities with combined sewer systems to enter into “Long Term Control Plans” in which they agree to spend a sizable amount of money to address overflow issues and water demands in their communities. For many cities this is the single largest item in the budget—citizens will be paying for this upgrade directly in their water bills well into the future.

Although defecatory justice is at root a social concern, we should not dismiss technological solutions. Groups like EmNet, born from research begun by electrical engineers at the University of Notre Dame, have done creative work in addressing the serious problem of CSOs. In one approach, a system of interconnected sensors and actuators monitor the capacity of sewer system sections to see if potential overflow can be averted. For example, if a rainwater line is reaching capacity, the system can identify other pipes to which runoff can be diverted. The end result is a system that does not produce an overflow until it has reached capacity across the board. Since 2010, for example, EmNet has helped the city of South Bend, Indiana, reduce its overflow of excrement, chemicals, and whatever else people put down the drain from nearly 2 billion gallons a year to about 500 million gallons. Similar “smart sewers” and upgrades to wastewater treatment facilities have also expanded to several other major cities.

Smart sewers and other innovations can improve sanitation in the short term for wealthy societies with highly developed waste management infrastructure; but elsewhere, and in the long term, techniques reliant on freshwater will almost certainly run dry, and fall short of defecatory justice. Simply exporting our freshwater flush system globally is not a sustainable solution—environmentally or financially.

PAUSE TO DIGEST

In the course of this research, it has been disconcerting to discover that the most mundane of our everyday practices have made us complicit in egregious harm. Yet, unless you are using a waterless toilet, closed-loop system, or composting toilet, most of us participate daily in perpetuating this crisis.

These issues of defecatory justice should matter to those in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Many Mennonites understand the natural cycles that are a part of God’s purposes, and that our healthy participation in those cycles call for a Christian response. As people committed to nonviolence and the diligent study of our interconnectedness, we should care about the places and people and beings who live downstream from our actions.

Nevertheless, a great gap exists between many Mennonite Christian understandings of how we should live our lives and the way we, in fact, actually live them. Inasmuch as Mennonites have become assimilated into the broader petro-chemical and industrial-growth society that surround us, we are acting in ways that disregard the environment and other species created by the God we worship. Our ability to believe that we can flush our urine and excrement “away” reflects traces of a dispensationalist theology that sees no need to preserve our planet in light of the fact that the earth is not a believer’s final home and so, ultimately, everything is going “away.”

But if, as most Christians profess, God loves life on this planet—and if that life is in peril—then our theology will need to reflect this. We are called, after all, to minister to the sick; and millions of people in the world are getting sick because of poor sanitary conditions. The most compassionate way to help the sick is not to treat only symptoms, but also to change the structures that sanction sickness.¹⁴

Furthermore, many refugees have left their homes because there is no access to water. But as a people concerned about preventing war and forced human migration, the solution to sanitation issues cannot only be to provide everyone a flush toilet or expand a model based on the Global North’s underground system that requires a steady volume of water. Ecological sanitation models—including options such as composting toilets, lined dry latrines, and closed-loop systems—should be the focus of creative engineering and social dignity designs.¹⁵

SEEKING SOLUTIONS

Unlike other environmental challenges where there are clear and immediate practical steps that Christians can take in response—such as reducing meat consumption to prevent deforestation, organizing to stop

14. Cf. “A true revolution of values will soon cause us to question the fairness and justice of many of our past and present policies. On the one hand, we are called to play the Good Samaritan on life’s roadside, but that will be only an initial act. One day we must come to see that the whole Jericho Road must be transformed so that men and women will not be constantly beaten and robbed as they make their journey on life’s highway. True compassion is more than flinging a coin to a beggar. It comes to see that an edifice which produces beggars needs restructuring.”—Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. *Beyond Vietnam: A Time To Break Silence*, April 4, 1967.—Retrieved from <https://americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkatimetobreaksilence.htm>.

15. Today, with food preparation and sanitary processes even more separated, it is possible to use human and other animal dung as a heat source as well. This is already happening in Sweden and Norway, Haiti and South Africa—that is, wherever there are innovative energy policy ideas to capture biogas heat from sewage sludge.—www.smartcitysweden.com/reference-objects/61/cleaner-air-in-stockholm-with-sewage-sludge/.

war (since militaries are some of the biggest polluters), or buying local in order to reduce our carbon-footprint—figuring out how to address the sanitation catastrophe befalling streams and our global siblings is not so direct.¹⁶

Ecological Loops

One crucial step is recognizing the central importance of ecological loops that maintain a balanced system of nutrients. When handled appropriately, the nutrition contained in human “waste” has the potential to enrich the earth from which we continually draw sustenance. Each time we eat plant-based food the soil is depleted of nutrients. But then, unlike other animals, we compound the problem by removing our leftover nutrients from the natural ecological loop through modern wastewater treatments. Furthermore, we use our most scarce and precious resource to do the dirty work: freshwater. So currently, as the temperatures are rising and the whole world is looking for freshwater to drink, we design our sanitation systems around water, then use more resources to separate the excrement and freshwater again. Rose George, the author of *The Big Necessity: The Unmentionable World of Human Waste and Why It Matters*, notes that

the material itself is as rich as oil and probably more useful. [Human excrement] contains nitrogen and phosphates that can make plants grow and also suck the life from water because its nutrients absorb available oxygen. It can be both food and poison. It can contaminate and cultivate. So we need to be careful, and we can be if people get more comfortable talking about poop and sanitation and can have a calm discussion about what to do. With proper planning, and great attention paid to industrial and pharmaceutical cross contaminants, in the future we could fertilize half or all our food, depending on our diet. . . . [I]f we could move our animal and humanure to our soil we might not need to rely on fossil fuel based fertilizers, or mined minerals from far away. Imagine how much energy we could save!¹⁷

16. In our initial research Rianna Isaak-Krauss and I recognized that most Mennonites in North America, like others who live in houses that just come with flush-water toilets, do not currently have adequate theological resources or social relationships to re-think our relationship with excrement. Cf. Isaak-Krauss’s sermon entitled “The Great Meal—Then What?” —<https://www.rivereastchurch.ca/sermon/the-great-meal-then-what/> (River East Church, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Aug. 11, 2019), and my keynote presentation for the 20th Annual Dialogues on Nonviolence, Religion, and Peace (Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, South Bend, Indiana, Oct. 25, 2018). —<https://kroc.nd.edu/news-events/events/2018/10/25/the-20th-annual-dialogues-on-nonviolence-religion-and-peace/>.

17. Rose George, Ted Talk, Feb. 2013.

Reframe the Discussion: A Defecatory Justice Convers(at)ion

Defecatory justice calls for a new kind of conversion. The first place I had a sustained encounter with a composting toilet was at the Carnival de Resistance in 2013 in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The Carnival de Resistance was a monthlong experiment in faith, arts, and ecological justice activism in urban re-wilding.¹⁸ Participants agreed to live collectively: in tents, off-grid, and as fossil-fuel-free as possible. While I had camping experience, I had never used a composting toilet. Initially, I was disgusted. But by the end of the month I experienced a profound conversion experience. My perspective on how I released excess from my body completely changed as I came to see the advantages of ecological sanitation and became motivated to remove our carbon from the hydrological cycle. In the days following the Carnival, I noticed for the first time how toilets enable us to flush-and-forget. This mirrored so many other aspects of my life that alienated me from the impact of my actions.

Molly Winter, of ReCode Portland, an organization working on the legalization of sustainable building practices, calls this re-frame “advanced potty training.” Most children’s earliest socialization is around the potty; if we want to adjust habits and our thinking, it will require daily diligence to retrain our minds and hearts. Like all deep work, it will require resources of community, grace, commitment, and thoughtful strategies.¹⁹

There was a time when the work of Mennonite/Anabaptist service-related agencies was focused was on providing “appropriate technology.”²⁰ In addition to being smart agricultural innovation, appropriate technology was about supporting the dignity of marginalized people, the cultivation of life-sustaining food, and economic sufficiency. Implementing these programs required ingenuity and assessment together with grassroots communities in pursuit of what worked well in context. The same will be true for sanitation. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

18. Carnival de Resistance, www.carnivalderesistance.com.

19. Molly Winter, Ted Talk, April 2016. “The taboo secret to healthier plants and people.”—https://www.ted.com/talks/molly_winter_the_taboo_secret_to_healthier_plants_and_people?language=en.

20. Partially motivated by a theological tradition that resists thralldom to a narrative of the salvation of global technological progress, as well as a reproductive tradition that encouraged large families, Anabaptists embraced the appropriate technology movement which focused on technological choice and on applications that were human labor-intensive, decentralized, and locally autonomous. Many Anabaptists were also wary of broader society’s idolization of endless growth, and developed small-scale practices that were energy-efficient and environmentally sound long before such habits became popular.

One part of the reframe is to look for solutions to the challenge of sanitation from those living at the margins. Solutions that are accessible for people on the margins tend to work for everyone, whereas solutions that work for the center tend to be inaccessible or impractical for those who live at the edges. The most threatened and marginalized human beings generally live in similarly threatened ecosystems.²¹ To close the protection gap, we must look to the unprotected, and learn from their leadership on how they restore their environments by transforming dangerous pollutants into valuable resources. Some communities struggling with open defecation issues, for example, have begun Community-Led Total Sanitation (CLTS) initiatives. CLTS begins by facilitating a local community's own appraisal and analysis of their current waste systems and practices, and then works with them to design the ideal model while assessing existing and needed resources to maintain the desired infrastructure and community change. Community insiders and outsiders then together implement the action steps suggested by locals. The model recognizes that change is most effective and sustainable when communities themselves recognize the problems and own the solutions.²²

Since 2006, the SOIL (Sustainable Organic Integrated Livelihoods) operation in Haiti has provided household customers in Cap-Haitien and Port-au-Prince with access to safe, dignified sanitation. SOIL provides locally sourced organic cover material (waste from sugar cane and peanut processing) used in place of water for flushing, and locally manufactured sanitation sealable containers for solid waste. These buckets are collected weekly, and then washed and re-circulated. Each customer receives a ceramic loo that goes outside the bucket and assists with urine diversion. The waste is collected and transported to one of SOIL's waste treatment sites, where it is transformed into compost through a carefully monitored process that includes thorough lab testing. Finished compost is sold as an effective soil amendment.²³ Plants grown in SOIL's compost help reforest and stabilize Haiti's environment. Those plants, in turn, provide nutritious, organic food for people to eat—and then excrete, completing the ecological loop. Their social business model creates jobs as well as new value chains that are far-reaching and supportive of life's most crucial

21. Interview about liberation ecology with Sasha Kramer, founder and executive director of SOIL, Dec. 18, 2018. cf. <https://www.oursoil.org/liberation-ecology-in-unexpected-places-soils-porta-potty-makeover/>.

22. Community-Led Total Sanitation Knowledge Hub.—<https://www.communityledtotalsanitation.org/page/clts-approach>.

23. Piceno YM, Pecora-Black G, Kramer S, Roy M, Reid FC, Dubinsky EA, et al. (2017) "Bacterial community structure transformed after thermophilically composting human waste in Haiti".—*PLoS ONE* 12(6): e0177626. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0177626>.

daily necessities. And compared with the usual waste treatment systems, SOIL's composting sites emit less greenhouse gas.

Innovation on this issue, however, turns out to be illegal in many places in the U.S. According to Winter, of ReCode Portland, most urban zoning codes were written on the assumption that standard sewage grids would endure forever with incremental updates. But "innovation isn't always incremental." Groups who work on ecological building design often need to challenge archaic zoning restrictions so that closely monitored experiments in closed-loop sewage treatment can move forward.²⁴ ReCode Portland, for example, has successfully received some of the first permits of its kind in an effort to design sanitation systems in three high-rise residential buildings in downtown Portland, Oregon, that do not flush into the sewer system. Instead, water drained from sinks and showers is reused to cool mechanical systems, flush toilets, and water the landscape. Plants and bacteria treat the water to the highest standards on site, and the recycled water then filters through the layers of gravel and soil, cleanly directed into the groundwater below.

Innovating on this front was cheaper for Portland than updating the surrounding sewer infrastructure. According to Winter's calculations, three-fourths of the cost of upgrading existing systems to meet increased demand goes just to fund the cost of the pipes snaking through our cities. "As we renovate," Winter said, "it might make more sense to treat and reuse everything on site."²⁵ But this means we have to deal with our "waste." Who's willing? Simple-living Mennonites should be.

Reframing Elimination as Part of a Healthy Body and Soul

In addition to making economic sense and peacemaking sense, healthy elimination is good for the body as well—throughout the lifespan, but especially as one begins to age. Sages of long ago understood that a good bowel movement was the key to good health. A lot of stress sits in our guts, and the food we eat interacts with it, bringing us closer to or further from wholeness with each choice we make. If we know that the health of our garden's soil increases when we eat healthier and compost what we eliminate, it is yet another motivator to eat fiber and be regular.²⁶

Our texts and best traditions invite us to "begin with the end in mind." There is an etymological connection between the words for "bowels" and "compassion" in biblical Greek (σπλαγχνίζομαι, meaning to be moved in

24. Molly Winter, TED Talk, April 2016.

25. Ibid.

26. This is where I consider defecatory justice to be connected to food justice, just the back end of it. At Wildseed land community, a Black and Brown led experiment in food sovereignty and solidarity culture, we built a composting toilet and called it "the Movement Center for Release and Renewal." <http://www.wildseedcommunity.org/>.

the inward parts). When we have constipation in our compassion, it is crucial that our “bowels of compassion” are moved by what we are observing around us.²⁷ In Judaism, the Asher Yatzar blessing (אֲשֶׁר יָצַר אֶתְכֶם, בְּרַחֲמֵי), is a prayer recited upon leaving the bathroom. This prayer comes in a series of blessings generally offered upon waking up in the morning, following on blessings for the miracles of opening your eyes or having your feet touch the floor.

Blessed are you, Adonai our God, ruler of the universe who formed humans with wisdom and created us with openings and hollows and tubes. It is clear in the presence of your glorious throne that if one of them were ruptured or if one of them were blocked it would be impossible to stand before you and praise you for any length of time. Blessed are you Adonai, who heals all flesh and acts wondrously.²⁸

The humble bowel movement can remind us of our own humanity and the Creator’s greatness—and humor.

It can also remind us of our connection to all things. When participating in decolonization work alongside First Nations leaders in Canada with Christian Peacemaker Teams, an indigenous elder said:

you Christians say “do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” We say yes to that, but we also have always recognized that humans aren’t the only ones in the flow. It’s deeper than that. We say, “do unto those downstream as you would have those upstream do unto you.”²⁹

Who is downstream of us? What are they experiencing metaphorically and literally from our disposable-heavy society? What does it mean for us to flush our waste onto them? Who is upstream of you? What do you have to say to them? This is the Golden Rule translated into our water systems.

Thinking about where our excrement and urine go is the first step in activating our ability to turn “waste” into resources. We must design sanitary solutions in ways that do not compromise the health of our neighbors and future generations. Change is hard; but it is necessary. Transforming our systems is safer than staying with the status quo.

The next time you go to the bathroom ask yourself, as Molly Winter does, “Where does my poop and pee go? Will they be gainfully employed?

27. Cf. the first edition of the African Methodist Episcopal book of Discipline (1817) cited in Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., “Of the Black Church and the Making of the Black Public,” in *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003), 341.

28. Jewish blessing recitation.—Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berachot (60b).

29. Delegation with Christian Peacemaker Teams Steering Committee, April 2013.

Or will they be wreaking havoc in some waterway somewhere?"³⁰ If you don't know, find out. And if you don't like the answer, go to the people who have decision-making power in your area and let them know that you are ready to have an open conversation about transformative change in our sanitation systems.

30. Molly Winter, Recode TED Talk, April 2016.

RESEARCH GRANTS

The Mennonite Historical Society announces an "Open Research Grant" of \$2,000 to promote research and publication in Anabaptist-Mennonite studies. To apply, send the following materials by March 1, 2020, to Leonard Gross, Secretary, Mennonite Historical Society, Goshen College, Goshen, IN 46526: a two- or three-page summary of the project stating its significance to the field of Anabaptist-Mennonite history, a budget of anticipated expenses, a vitae, and one letter of recommendation. All applicants must be members of the Mennonite Historical Society. Recipients of the award will be announced at the May meeting of the MHS. Board of Directors. Disbursements will be made by June 1. The Prize Selection Committee may choose not to award the grant if none of the applications is deemed acceptable. *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* has the "right of first refusal" for scholarly articles that result from research funded by the grant.

The Schafer-Friesen Research Fellowship is awarded annually by the Mennonite Historical Library (MHL) at Goshen College to support scholarship in Reformation and Anabaptist History. First priority for the award is to individuals doing advanced research using the resources of the Mennonite Historical Library. The award will support travel costs to the Mennonite Historical Library, and up to three weeks of room and board. The Fellowship may also be used, secondarily, to support publications on Reformation and Anabaptist topics. To apply, please send a letter of interest, along with a one-page research plan and budget, by March 1, 2020, to John D. Roth at johndr@goshen.edu.