

WATER: DRAWING A LINE IN THE SAND

By Sue Jackson

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The twelfth of October dawned unremarkably. It was a Thursday – my writing day. Starting the day as usual with a walk, I was bowled along by a hot, dry wind, before returning home and taking up my customary position in front of the computer. At lunch-time my daughter, Emma, arrived back from Uni with something that is rare for her - a splitting headache - and mascara running down her cheeks after dust ‘like glass’ had blown into her eyes and she had been unable to dislodge it.

That afternoon I attended a meeting on ‘Water’, hosted by the Victorian Women’s Trust. Suddenly all the anecdotal information, the snippets of scientific findings and my increasing and nebulous anxieties clicked, like a Rubik’s cube, into place. I realised that ‘Drought’, with the suggestion we have been here before and the situation will right itself in the end, is a misnomer. In fact, for us as one of the world’s ‘hot spots’, the future has already arrived. Australia is in a water crisis caused by global warming. That evening I drew my own line in the sand.

Previously, I’d vacillated. ‘What a gorgeous day’, was how I sometimes greeted people in response to the unseasonable warmth. Fearful of sounding like Job with all his complaints, I’d determined to stop making the increasingly obvious connection with global warming. I’d also taken to avoiding news reports on the plight of farmers and our rivers, flora and fauna – I just switched channels. But that Thursday evening the lump in my throat wouldn’t go away and I realised I had to *do* something. And the first action that sprang to mind was to share some of my thoughts with you – so I hope you’re not into switching channels too.

Maude Barlow had been the guest speaker at that afternoon meeting. You may have heard of her already, or remember her – one of the first articles I ever wrote for this newsletter (*Discovering Maude Barlow: My Introduction to Economic Globalisation*) was inspired by her last trip to Melbourne in 2000. Back then, she helped me understand the huge impact multinational corporations were having on democracy and the world as we know it. I had particularly admired her capacity ‘to bring to life potentially dry and tortuous political issues by focussing on the human angle’, and in that she hasn’t changed a bit. But six years on, she comes with an even more sobering message.

Over the intervening years, Maude has been busy. She has been the recipient of numerous honours, the most recent being ‘The Alternative Nobel’ - the 2005 Right Livelihood Award, from the Swedish Parliament. She has written several highly acclaimed books, including ‘Blue Gold: The Fight to Stop Corporate Theft of the World’s Water’. She has become a world-renowned champion in what she refers to as the ‘global contest around water’.

I remember being intrigued when I read once that the very first word that 7-year-old Helen Keller ever tried to say was ‘water’. Being blind, deaf and dumb, she had no way of knowing that life began in water and is impossible in its absence, yet at a deep level she obviously understood its significance. Back in her day, at the end of the nineteenth century, amidst all the social hardships, it would have been unthinkable that even the poorest of the poor would be deprived of water. Yet, of course, that is exactly what is happening today.

Two billion people on our planet no longer have access to clean water, and it is estimated that by 2025, two thirds of the world’s population will find themselves in that

plight. We are polluting, depleting and diverting surface water far faster than we can replenish it, and ‘mining’ below ground water rapaciously.

I was shocked to learn that at this very moment there is a contest around control of the world’s water supplies and that there are people determined to create a cartel, a collusive syndicate, of owners of water rights. These people argue that you can’t stop free enterprise; for them, the world water crisis represents a great investment opportunity. As has been the case for some time with energy, water is now being allocated to corporations before it is even located. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and other key players in the World Water Forum are currently investigating how best to commodify the globe’s diminishing reserves of water.

Maude, on the other hand, believes that water, our most precious resource, is a public service, a common heritage, a human right, which no one should be denied because they can’t afford it. Just as big business has taken out patents on seeds, maybe in the not-too-distant future there will be an attempt to patent water – and this too will result in expensive international court battles. For these reasons, she argues water needs to be returned to public control.

Since the vast majority of people with limited water access are poor, Maude points out that water represents a key issue of social justice. In South Africa, where she has travelled extensively, she says that it is hard to believe sometimes that apartheid has ended. While white home owners hose down their drive ways, black township dwellers stand endlessly with buckets on their heads waiting their turn at the community tap. The recent award-winning, must-see, South African film, *Tsotsi*, based on the story by Athol Fugard, highlights many of these discrepancies.

Meanwhile, in Mexico City, which is collapsing in on itself because the water has been used up, the government has simply built huge, fenced pipes out into indigenous communities, by means of which it siphons off their water for urban use.

Maude cites China as another example of the disaster that can result when the market is allowed to dictate priorities. China was the first country to put a dollar value on its water. This happened fifteen years ago, when water was used to fuel the technological revolution, and in the process, the water table was destroyed. Now the vast majority of Chinese people drink dirty water because their below-ground and surface water is so heavily polluted.

The economic rationalist ethos of the multinationals is commonly at odds with social justice. Big European-based companies are 'mining' water in places like India and Ghana, leaving the local people destitute. For those people, it is a case of 'water, water, everywhere, and ne'er a drop to drink.'

Last year, Coke, Pepsi and Nestle put 200 billion litres of water into bottles; bottles that turn into mountains of plastic garbage, that leaches back into the water system. Coca Cola is heavily implicated in a range of environmental disasters, and recently there have been wide-spread protests in developing countries in response to the realisation that it takes three litres of water to make one litre of coke.

Economic globalisation is creating problems in other ways as well. Agribusinesses are replacing small farms world-wide, with the message to the farmers often being – 'Get big or die'. The World Bank has designated Costa Rica, for example, as the rose grower for the United States. As a result, all the best Costa Rican water, land and farmers are allocated to this project. But you can't eat or drink roses. And the Costa Rican government, along with so many others, is not biting the bullet and cracking

down on these industrial farming practices, which are the most voracious users of water in the world.

In Australia, Maude suggested, we have moved particularly quickly to a system where our water is up for sale. Indeed, with the Free Trade agreement, our water can be put on the open market. Our government has effectively opened the door to the US water barons.

Furthermore, in this, the driest of the continents, we are using our prime land and precious water to grow food and wine for export, mainly to line the pockets of the people at the top end of town. There are some ludicrous examples of the unthinking profligacy in our water use – for example, rice growing, which requires so much water, located in an arid state like South Australia. And Timbercorp Sunraysia, funded by investors connected with the Macquarie Bank, buys massive amounts of agricultural water from local farmers for almond crops, grown exclusively for export.

Obviously exports are a fact of economic life, but Maude argues for a radical realignment, both nationally and internationally, of agricultural priorities. She suggests that the days of exports being the driving force behind our agricultural systems are coming to an end. Water and energy, the twin necessities of economic globalisation, are in decreasing supply. Therefore, this model is no longer sustainable. Farmers will need encouragement and assistance in making the inevitable transition to food production for local consumption.

The reality is that Australia is hitting the water wall earlier than other places on earth. 87% of Victorian crops will fail this year. The implications of how we deal with this need to be radical. It requires nothing less than a revolution in our thinking and value systems.

Our government, with its narrow economic rationalist perspective, is likely to insist, even in the face of mounting evidence of the gravity of the environmental problem, on business as usual. Governments, elected as they are for limited periods, which incline them to focus on the short-term, typically lack vision.

At a meeting I attended at RMIT in October, guest speaker, Bob Brown, suggested the issues around energy and water have much in common, in that people are inclined to ask the wrong question. In his opinion, 'How can we find alternative sources of power by 2010 or 2020?' needs to be replaced with the question, 'How can we come up with creative ways of using less?' We need to be husbanding our diminishing resources.

Political parties are not pushing this obvious shift of focus, he suggests, because requiring citizens to pull in their belts is not a vote winner. Instead, politicians talk about alternative energy sources, especially nuclear power. Or with water, they promote the construction of new dams, ignoring the contra-indications such as population displacement, ecological damage and the fact that the reservoirs we have are way under capacity.

The dominant ideology has it that we can continue to grow and that we will find the water somewhere. Like the cavalry arriving just in the nick of time to relieve the besieged homesteaders, technological advances will supposedly come to our rescue. In this context we hear lots about the possibilities of de-salination plants. Maude argues that these should be the last option – what you do when you are Saudi Arabia - because de-salination is a horrible technology. The plants are energy intensive, highly polluting, emit an offensive smell and produce awful-tasting water.

As creative solutions are unlikely to come from the top down, the obvious solution is we have to build a powerful civil rights movement to remind the government that we vote them in. And we have to look to people, not political parties, to initiate change.

Lately, there have been heartening examples of major change coming from the bottom up. The new communications technology is a real boon in that regard as it unites people around the world and makes a speedy response to injustice a possibility. Amnesty International's 'Signature in a Bottle' campaign enabled signatories to go on record about their desire for a cease-fire in Lebanon. Closer to home - the recent courageous decision of the Liberal back-benchers to cross the floor to express their opposition to the proposed changes to the legislation on refugees was no doubt supported by the on-line campaign of the citizens watchdog group, Get-Up, which collected numerous protestors' signatures.

Reclaiming water as a public trust and wresting it back from those who have claimed it will not be easy. Yet there are already some successes. Uruguay is the first country in the world to pass a referendum affirming that water is a constitutional right. With it now in public hands, the big companies that had been selling water, have been forced to leave. The growing and increasingly powerful global civil society movement, with its origins in the third world, is devising principles on which water justice must be based and is seeking a convention on the right to water. Canadians are uniting under the banner of the Blue Planet Project, which works to stop commodification of the world's water.

Maude argues that there needs to be a rapid consciousness shift in the vast majority of the population. We have all heard the phrase 'tipping point'; her hope is that

maybe we can still tip back the other way. It is a delicate balance - we need to maintain hope, but we are in crisis now, and we need to act together to attempt to avert disaster.. The question has become – how can we regenerate water so that we can continue to live on earth?

Maude suggests that citizens must reinvest in nature and its ability to cleanse itself and develop a more spiritual relationship with water. ‘Watermark’, the project established by the Victorian Women’s Trust, which is just about to present its charter, is a great example of what she has in mind. At the same time, we need to critique government policies and question our leaders’ connections with big corporations.

As a society, we will need to commit to massive conservation and reclamation and water justice. Maude concluded by saying, ‘On my bad days, I think the planet would do fine without us. Sometimes I think the wrong species evolved. Maybe it should have been the dolphins. It will certainly take the rest of our lives to fix it, but what else would we be doing?’

Reflecting on the Maude Barlow meeting afterwards, I was amazed that I’d not come across such eminently sensible conclusions before. But then I realised that Maude’s unique contribution lies in her ability to see and communicate the big picture, whereas what we normally have access to are mere fragments of information and often serious misinformation.

A month has passed since I started this article, and last night I lay in bed listening to what has always been the sweetest lullaby – the sound of rain on the roof. It was such a relief. For long moments, I allowed myself to fantasise that this signalled the end of the water crisis. But of course it doesn’t. Yesterday was also the coldest day in November

in Melbourne for 92 years, and a bushfire raged amidst the falling snow in the Blue Mountains - evidence of the extremes that are the familiar markers of climate change.

Al Gore makes the point in *An Inconvenient Truth* that while humans facing catastrophe are inclined to respond in either of two ways, by **d**enial or **d**espair, there is a third alternative. And it is crucial that we find that third position, because it's only from there that solutions emerge.

This notion has therapeutic echoes. After all, it is exactly this third position that we are often trying to help people get in touch with in their private or working lives. Personally, I've discovered that my third 'd' is **d**ecision. Deciding to draw a line in the sand – deciding to commit myself to taking action on global warming - is the only way I will avoid falling into a pit of denial or despair. And I'm sure as the people who consult with us become more and more worried about the future, no longer only for their grandchildren, but now for their children and even themselves, it will be increasingly important for us therapists to have some hope to offer.

If you haven't done so already, consider:

- Watching Al Gore's amazing *An Inconvenient Truth*;
- Installing a rain-water tank;
- Forgoing commercial water in plastic bottles;
- Signing the Watermark charter, which will be available in the New Year
(I will certainly be requesting that VAFT does);
- Lobbying and protesting whenever you get the chance;

And if you've seen *Kenny*, you'll know what I mean when I say:

- Flush less often.