

Cry Me a River



Send him mail.



“Win-Win World” is an original column appearing sporadically on Thursdays at Everything-Voluntary.com, by Russell L. Roth. Russell is a 30-year marketing veteran and graduate of Jay Snelson’s “Science of Human Interaction” course (he calls it “Win/Win 101”). He has owned and operated businesses in advertising, real estate and internet marketing. He holds a degree in Studio Art from the State University of New York and is seeking a music publisher for his portfolio of original Country/Folk fusion songs. A native of Central New York state, Russell currently resides in southern California with his wife, Valerie. Archived columns can be found here. WWW-only RSS feed available here.



It’s not often I find myself in a restroom, confronted by something I’ve never seen before. When I do, I have to stop and consider the implications.

This time the subject of my fascination was a small silver plaque, hanging on the tiled wall directly above the urinal I was in the process of using.

Was this plaque announcing that some famous person had also peed in this exact spot? Was it commemorating some important event in someone’s personal history, such as the passing of a particularly troublesome kidney stone?

No, this plaque was celebrating ME.

Specifically, I was being lauded for my wise decision to utilize this particular porcelain facility for the purpose of depositing my pee. Here's what the plaque read:

This facility [I assume the writer meant the facility management] is committed to protecting and preserving the environment. By using this touch-free, completely hygienic Falcon Water-free system you are helping the environment to conserve an average of 40,000 gallons of fresh water per urinal, per year.

It goes without saying that this made me feel pretty special.

But as I headed to the sink to soap up, it suddenly occurred to me that the process wasn't exactly "touch-free" OR "completely hygienic" - if you catch my drift. The afterglow of learning that I had just helped to protect and preserve the environment simply by using this facility quickly began to fade as I wondered what else the plaque had gotten wrong.

Preserving That Which Requires no Preservation

I couldn't quibble about the 40,000-gallons-a-year thing. Falcon had obviously done its homework and I didn't possess the time or the resources required to confirm or disprove its estimate.

So instead I began to think about whether my actions had really protected and preserved the environment. Was the environment truly any better off for my being here? Was my bodily fluid going anywhere different from where it would be headed had I utilized a more traditional, water-powered unit? Presumably not. So - no additional environmental protection there.

Well, what about the obvious: the water savings? You know, the water that *didn't* get used as a medium for transporting my urine to its final destination? 40,000 gallons is nothing to sneeze at. But I didn't see how this could be construed as "protecting" the environment. Why? Because I wouldn't exactly classify the use of 40,000 gallons of water as an attack on the environment.

To be fair, 40,000 gallons of fresh water were being diverted from the task of handling my pee to other uses. (Bathing elephants at the local zoo? Pressure washing gum off the sidewalk of some shopping mall?) So I guess my act did qualify as preservation.

But so what?

Water, as we know, is a commodity that's anything but precious. In fact, it's one of the most common substances in the entire known universe. I mean, it's all over the place!

Ahah, you say. Haven't you heard? There's a water shortage.

Really?

Just what do we mean when we use the term "water shortage"? Well, it means that water is scarcer at present than at some point in the past, I suppose. But why is this? And whose fault is it, anyway?

Who's to Blame?

Let's look at whether we are facing a real shortage. Granted, there's a drought in Southern California. There's *always* a drought in Southern California. Southern California used to be desert. Its natural state is to have practically no water. At some point in the past, water was introduced to the area in large quantities and voila: no more desert. We had enough water at one time. Now we somehow have less. What happened? Where did the water go?

Of course, we know that the water didn't go anywhere. After all, the earth, for the purposes of our discussion, is a closed ecosystem. The geographic distribution of fresh water across that ecosystem may vary. But the sum total of water on and inside the earth remains, for all practical purposes, the same over time.

What happened was that, over time, the population increased here in southern California. Industry grew. Production and prosperity boomed. And all that progress takes water, among many other things. Slowly but surely, the growing water demand began to exceed the supply. And in the process somebody messed up. They let this happen. Through inaccurate planning, denial, unwillingness to find the money to expand the infrastructure or locate new water sources, or whatever, somebody screwed the pooch.

Can You Guess Who?

That's right - the same people who willingly took on the job of providing us with an adequate supply of fresh water in the first place: the state, and our state-owned, controlled and regulated water suppliers. These guys have all failed miserably to adequately and consistently meet the people's need for water.

And it gets even worse. Environmentalists recently successfully pressured Congress into imposing a man-made water shortage (or rather, reverting a large portion of California real estate back to its natural desert state). It did this by refusing to allow billions of gallons of water to be supplied to arid farmland in the northern region of the state. The reason? Worry that the diversion would upset a bunch of 3-inch, minnow-like fish.

Naturally, this reduction to dust of otherwise arable land is expected to decimate the local economy of the San Joaquin Valley and jack up the prices of the fruits and vegetables that will now have to be obtained from other sources, exacerbating the cost and hardship that come with drought. All this because Obama's state decided that fish are more important than water or jobs. So much for representing the people...

Make no mistake. You and I are not responsible for this water shortage. The state is the guilty party. As expected, Obama would disagree. He's blaming the drought on — guess what — the evil spectre of global warming.

Someone Owes Us an Apology

Do any of these government folks feel guilty for letting us down? Are they begging forgiveness and scrambling to find ways to right their wrong, to prove our earlier confidence in them was not misplaced?

Are you kidding?

No, they're doing what the state always does: attempting to shift the blame, changing the rules in midstream (pun intended), creating more regulations and devising more punishments to force obedience.

Here's how it works. First the state attempts to escape responsibility for the drought conditions by pointing the finger at Mother Nature. Then it makes us feel guilty for using water. This, they figure, softens us up for the "remedy": assuming even more control over our lives without actually fixing the problem. Now they call a "water emergency", imposing special limitations on water use by citizens. And God forbid, should you be found guilty of watering your lawn on the wrong day, or washing your car in your own driveway (I guess the water at home is different from the water at your local car wash)... you'll be slapped with injunctions and fines. Your water supply system will be fitted with a flow restriction device designed to force compliance, and you'll have to pay the cost. Your water supply might even be cut off completely. And of course this is all backed by the usual coercive methods designed to extract the funds from you should you refuse to pay, up to and including confiscation of your property to cover any fines or assessments.

By the way, businesses are forced to "do their part" as well. In my municipality, restaurants can't even legally offer you a glass of water at your table. You have to specifically request it.

Yes, your state takes great pride in forcing you to use less water. Here's what my local government considers its water conservation-related duty:

Our mission is to protect the City of Corona's water reclamation

systems, water quality, our residents, our workers and the environment.

Um... excuse me? How do the above-described methods — limiting and denying water — serve to protect residents, workers and the environment? Seems to me, the best way to offer protection is to provide the damn water. Do you agree?

And it's not just local. The State of California recently passed a bill requiring metropolitan water suppliers to cut usage 20% by the year 2020. This requirement, and its related costs, gets passed on to Californians, obviously.

This is how the state apologizes for its mistakes. This is how it fixes its failures and rights its wrongs. It shifts the blame to you and the boogeyman of global warming. Why? Because it can. And because it's easier than finding the wherewithal to build more reservoirs and pipelines and other ways to get you the water it promised you when it took on the responsibility of providing the stuff in the first place.

Your state has violated your trust and made you believe that you are part of the problem. This is more than just simple betrayal. This is abuse.

Why do we stand for this? Because we all want to be seen as protecting and preserving the environment, not as the water hogs the state has told us we are. Yeah, give us more waterless urinals!!!

We've been sold down the river, as it were, and we not only tolerate it from our state, we demand it. That's the really sick part. We're the ones who have charged our state with doing these things. Is it any wonder the state makes use of the tools we gave it?

Feelings...

There's another way the state could be treating this situation that would at least *feel* less violating, and it would achieve the same goal of conservation without resorting to coercion.

Our power companies, while also highly controlled and regulated by the state, at least have a better solution. They use a tiered billing system to *encourage* conservation, not *enforce* it.

Here's how it works. During the summer months when energy usage peaks, the power companies manage the heightened demand with sliding per-kilowatt hour rates rather than levy fines against "hogs". The more electricity you use, the more you pay per kilowatt hour. This results in huge power bills for heavy electricity use. During one particularly steamy summer we didn't spare the AC, and for the first month our power bill approached

\$800!

As you can imagine, we didn't like this. But we understood that, in the real world of free economics, as demand (usage) increases, so must prices. And so this power situation felt more natural to us. We certainly didn't feel betrayed or abused. Just poor. So we voluntarily cut way back on our usage. Not because we felt threatened by the neighborhood bully, but because we needed the money for other expenses. Bottom line is, because this model feels more like the way a free, capitalist market operates, it was at least tolerable.

In the region where I live, we also are famous for our traffic jams. But these have been partially remedied by toll roads and express lanes. These are literally pay-as-you go, and they enable motorists to shave significant travel time from their schedules. These options give us a real choice: do we wish to pay "nothing" (except that which is extorted from us in the form of taxes) and suffer a stop-and-go journey on public roadways? Or would we rather pay a bit more and minimize frustration, grief and travel time? The fees are set on some of these toll roads according to day and time. As demand (traffic) increases, so does the rate. Here again, we have a choice and it "feels" right. It feels like a semi-free market.

Back to the water shortage... To be fair, some localities are adopting a tiered system of billing for water usage. But are they eliminating government-imposed restrictions, penalties and police-state tactics designed to force compliance?

Come on, now... do you really have to ask?

To get a picture of how truly insane the state's police-and-punish model is, think of it this way. When was the last time a *business* threatened to penalize you for buying too much of its product? Absurd, right? Businesses *want* you to use as much of their product as you can afford. The power companies and toll roads understand this, if only intuitively. Why don't the water companies? Because where I live, the state owns the water. And all politicians and bureaucrats understand is coerce and control.

If the state were a business, we'd all quickly fire it as a provider. Why do we put up with its shameful behavior just because it's the state?

Ending the Water Shortage

This could happen tomorrow, simply by privatizing state-owned water companies.

The whole concept of water as a precious resource to be controlled is wrong and out-dated. Were it treated as a product, there would never be a water shortage... at least not for long. The water companies (yes, I said companies, because in a free market there would be competition for your business) would always be looking for new, innovative ways to get you all the water you need. Otherwise, they'd have no product to sell you. No product, no

revenue; no revenue, no profit.

The state has no competitors. It doesn't care whether you use water or not – so it has nothing to lose by answering “excessive use” with coercion and punishment. It's what the state *does*.

This all serves to underscore the differences between the free market and the state. The free market seeks to increase your satisfaction in order to keep your business; the state doesn't care about your business, it doesn't care about your level of satisfaction. It cares only about controlling resources that it calls limited and, ultimately, you.

The water shortage, such as it is, could soon be eliminated if usage, not conservation, became the goal. As long as the state is permitted to control the water supply, this won't happen.

So the next time you feel guilty for using a fresh water-driven porcelain facility, remember: *It's the state that controls the bowl.*

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