

When the well runs dry: Scarcity evokes community

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [February 26, 2008](#) issue

There were 15 people in my house when the well ran dry. It was Thanksgiving, and everyone knew that they did not have to flush every time. Those who were spending the night had learned how to take navy showers: turn the water on long enough to get wet, turn it off, soap yourself, turn the water on long enough to rinse, and turn it off again. If the water ever gets really nice and hot, then you know that you have left it on too long.

Everyone knew this, but we still ran out of water. When I turned the kitchen tap to fill the coffee pot after Thanksgiving dinner, all that came out was a long airy gasp. "We're out of water!" I yelled. People looked at me uncomprehendingly. Surely that one little secret flush had not made the difference. Surely that one extra minute under the showerhead had not caused everyone to go without water for the rest of the afternoon. But it had.

Someone went to the grocery store for plastic jugs of water. Someone else helped Ed fetch water from the creek to flush the toilets and water the animals. By evening, those still in residence had learned how to brush their teeth with four tablespoons of water. When our guest Kathleen got ready to leave the next morning, she said, "I have never been so grateful for running water before. I never knew I could get by on so little. Why do I let it run and run at home?"

When my husband Ed and I chose a bored well 12 years ago, we knew we were choosing to live on less water than people who drilled wells instead. Drilled wells go deep, often by necessity. One neighbor had to go 700 feet to hit water, and even then she could only draw half a gallon a minute. My well is 27 feet deep, which means that I practically drink surface water. When the rain does not come for months on end, I am in big trouble.

But drought is not the only problem. A lot of people have moved to my area in the past several years, so that there are more of us tapping into a limited supply. When

you run out of water, you can do at least two things: drill a deeper well or learn to live on what you have. When the man from Davidson Well Drilling came out after Thanksgiving to help us wrest the concrete lid off our well, he told us that we had 60 inches of water. For purposes of comparison, I am 70 inches tall. We decided to live on what we had.

This means that I have begun making weekly trips to the Laundromat in town. The first time I went, I took three loads of laundry and 15 quarters with me, remembering such trips from my college days. After I had crammed all of my whites into the Maxi-Load washer, I looked at the red number 18 by the coin slot. What could it mean? Did the wash cycle take 18 minutes? Was this the 18th washer in the establishment? Gradually it occurred to me that the water was not going to start flowing until I put 18 quarters in the slot.

Now I show up with pockets full of heavy metal. I can do three loads of laundry in just under an hour. While I am waiting, I can also watch children playing under the folding tables while their mothers catch up on news. I can joke with the guy who does not know the first thing about how to fold a fitted sheet. I can flirt with the little Latina girl who holds the door for me when I take my clothes back to my car, although our eye contact is the only common language we have.

When I first started showing up, some of the regulars could not figure out what someone like me was doing there. The woman who looks after the place started fishing by asking me where I lived. I told her, and she said she had seen a lot of new people since the drought. I could recognize most of them myself. One woman stuck around just long enough for the wash cycle, telling her pretty daughter to sit still and not touch anything. Then she took her wet clothes back to her car to dry in her dryer at home.

Some of my friends feel sorry for me because I have to go to the Laundromat, but I tell them not to. Not having enough water at home has brought me into contact with people who do not have enough of other things at home, and I am enjoying their company. I never really thought about it before, but scarcity evokes community. Every week now, I leave my place of private plenty to go to the common watering hole in town, where I get to watch my clothes go around and around while I think about things I might never have thought about otherwise, such as: How are we going to learn to live on what we have? How are we going to learn to share our limited supply?

This is a theological essay. I will leave you to figure out why.