

The sacred well

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When I bought the land where I now live, there was nothing on it but trees, cows and fescue. The first question the builder asked me was, "Where's your well?" I tried to hide my surprise. I had temporarily forgotten that water comes from the earth, not the sink. Of course there would have to be a well.

So I called Davidson Well Drilling, whose huge red truck appeared the next day with an enormous drill bit on it. After clanking his way across some groundhog burrows, the driver killed the engine, climbed out of the cab and began to squint at the land. I had hoped to meet a real live water witch, but this man was more of a geologist. He guessed where water was by the lay of the land, preferring valleys to hills. By the next afternoon I wondered if he should learn to use a dowsing rod. He had drilled three large holes and struck nothing but rock.

As I watched him position his drill over spot number four, I suddenly saw him as a lab technician trying to find a vein. The body of the land lay still beneath his probing. Under its surface ran rivers of life, which I was trying to tap into. My own life depended on the transfusion. Without it, I could not drink, cook, bathe, water plants and animals or wash clothes. With it, I could make a home.

When I heard a yell go up, I knew that the fourth "stick" had worked. The earth had granted me a lifeline, by letting me siphon off some of the water that was on its way somewhere else. Because of me, there would be less water flowing into the Chattahoochee River: less for the speckled trout, less for the wood ducks, less for the mountain laurel that drop their white petals into the river. There would be more water flowing into my septic tank, laced with laundry detergent, dish soap and human waste.

At that moment of high awareness, I promised the land that I would go easy on the water. I would remember where it came from. I would do as little harm to it as possible. I would remain grateful for the sacrifice.

Since my well is a shallow one with just 30 feet of water, it has been pretty easy to keep my promise. I wait at least an hour between loads of laundry, and another hour before I take a bath. I fill the horse trough no more than a third full at a time. If I forget to mention the well to friends from the city, they take long hot showers and wind up with hair full of soap bubbles. When they lean over blindly to twist the faucets, all they hear is the long, slow gasp of an empty pipe.

I have never been so conscious of my connection to the earth, and to my neighbors. As more and more people move nearby and dig wells, the water table drops lower and lower. If the farmer next door fertilizes his field, his chemicals end up in my water. If I wash my clothes with Clorox, I kill every benevolent bacterium around. Even the phrase “my water” makes no sense to me anymore. It is “our water,” one common underground lake to which we are all attached by the intravenous tubes we call plumbing.

Several years ago, I spent a week working on a Navajo reservation in Arizona with a youth group from Atlanta. We were assigned to a family who lived way out in the middle of nowhere, who hauled their water from town in 30-gallon containers. During my first day on the job, the mother of the family washed the lunch dishes in a big plastic tub while I rinsed and dried in another. I will never forget the look on her face when I flung the used rinse water into the yard. She was too polite to say anything, but her face said it all. I could have given that water to the chickens. I could have poured that water on the tomato plants. She knew where water came from, and at what price. I still thought it came cheap from sinks.

Now that those of us in northeast Georgia are three years into a bad drought, I am beginning to see the wisdom of the village well—not a dozen different holes sunk in a dozen different back yards, but one central place where a dozen neighbors meet to draw water. If we had something like that on Echota Road, then we might hold each other more accountable. No one could get away with pouring paint thinner down the drain, or washing the car twice a week when there is barely enough water for the vegetables. We could talk about what we are going to do to conserve our water, so that both it and we are around for the long haul. We might even understand how wells come to be called sacred, and why water is the most fundamental sacrament of all.

My well runs dry pretty regularly now. A simple drip from a bathroom faucet is enough to empty the reservoir overnight. Some of my friends are drilling deeper wells so that they can capture the water before anyone else gets to it. Others are

buying generators at the hardware store and sucking up what is left in the streams, until the catfish flap their fins in three inches of muddy sludge. For now, I am thinking that I will learn to live with what I have. If I do, then I may also learn that I do not “have” any of the things that give me life. They are all on loan from the Creator, who is counting on me and my kind to share them with all creation.