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TW Column by Emily Toth

On Human Fallibility and Foulness



The first time I ever saw a sanitary napkin roaster, I went berserk.

It was sometime in the last century (the 1990s) at the Rembrandt House Museum in Amsterdam. Just above the toilet paper holder in the women's bathroom, there was a sanitary pad "incinerator." It was a bit like a flat toaster. You were supposed to put your used bloody pad in the trough, slide it in, flip a switch, and—I guess—watch it whoosh up in flames.

Well, I didn't happen to have that kind of "napkin" (*maandverband*). It wasn't my time. But even worse—the device was broken.

That was my first memorable adventure in failing to save the earth. I've since become calmer about unorthodox

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disposal methods, but I remain a skeptic or even a sinner in the world of sustainable this and recyclable that. I often don't follow the rules. Maybe my moral compass is broken.

Future generations will suffer, of course. Thanks to my ilk, polar bears will be clawing at each other for water. Fargo will be a seaport. Empty chicken boxes will have buried my house, and old newspapers and plastic bags will be fornicating in the yard.

But at least I won't need the sanitary napkin incinerator. Haven't needed anything like that for years.

Now, I know people who write with great gusto or near hysteria about saving the earth. For instance, there was my sophomore student—"Gwendolyn"—who wrote one day that her heart was broken.

That did perk me up. Most student journal entries have the sad, "Aw, geez, I have to write something" vibe—but Gwendolyn's looked like it might draw on my reserves of sympathy. I could be a good older person. I could refer her for help. Maybe I could change her life (every teacher harbors that dream).

Why was Gwendolyn's heart broken? Because, she wrote, "I'm deeply committed to recycling." She'd just discovered that all the unwanted papers in our university's recycling containers were not being carted off to some respectful shredding, burning, or burying death. Rather, our university workers were dumping the contents of the recycling bins into the ordinary university garbage. The strict apartheid rules of recycling—paper here, bottles there—hadn't even been implemented.

"It's so messed up," Gwendolyn wailed. "My heart is broken!"

My heart doesn't overflow with tact. "If your heart is broken over that," I said, "what will you do if someone dies?"

I doubt if the exchange changed either of our lives, nor did it have an impact on recycling at my university. But it did give me a story to tell—the one I've just told—in which I'm not heroic. Some might say I was, well, rude. So I'll add to my Cruella image with what I now wish I'd told Gwendolyn:

Get a grip.

I won't say that friends of the earth are going too far. I'm more on their side—save the spotted owl! love the snail darter!—than on the side of mindless technology. I don't yearn to plunder the earth just because we can. At heart, I'm a Luddite. I've never attempted to tweet. I can't hack any famous writer's emails (wish I could). I don't know how to use my phone to eavesdrop on celebrities. I don't know how a can opener works.

Still, I don't think technology is an evil conspiracy or that Mother Nature is always our friend. I doubt that minor sins, such as my university's failure to recycle, will doom us all. Maybe that's because I don't believe in an afterlife. I'm not worried that I'll come back as a tampon.

What I would like is for people to stop being sappy, boring, or whiny when they write about nature, technology, or both. Why do they have to be so earnestly dull in their paeans to the mountains or their jeremiads about landfills? Why do they have to be such nutri-prudes about the pleasures of eating, say, tuna fish? (I won't name these authors. You're book readers; you know who they are. They've made you squirm, too.)

Likewise for the wonders of technology. Don't bore me with minutiae about how a dirt-free transmission works. Give me a car. Hell, give me a chauffeur. If I hire people, I'm recycling my money.

As a reader, I love gossip, humor, and new information. I cherish any lively insult, like Karl Marx's comment about "the idiocy of rural life" in the *Communist Manifesto*. I hate predictable writing. If you come up with a good cliché, please *don't* recycle it. Don't re-tweet it. Don't bury me in "you should."

Sometimes I do recycle. I separate my garbage, lovingly, as you're supposed to. I wash it, cherish it, give loving names to it. I call mine Ishmael, Clarissa, and Melvin. I hope to improve their self-esteem so they won't mate and

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multiply overnight.

But I also de-friend and delete all doom-filled predictions. As a child, I was told that Strontium-90 in milk would kill all the children in St. Louis—if the atomic bomb didn't get there first.

As a teen, I was told that if we didn't stop mating right now, there'd be so many people on earth there wouldn't be room to stand up. ("I'll do it lying down," our class clown offered.)

Then, in the 1990s, we were told that eating eggs would kill us. Now we're told that being fat will kill us. So, when I drive home from work, why don't I see fat kids with egg on their faces, dropping dead in the streets?

Hasn't happened even once.

Most heinous of all—I have not returned to the Rembrandt House Museum to see if they've repaired their napkin incinerator. It's been two decades, and napkins themselves have gotten much smaller, which I suppose makes them much less of a disposal hazard or despoiler of the earth.

But toilets in women's bathrooms still have those signs about not flushing anything except tissue. Every few weeks, some public toilet in my vicinity overflows. Maybe my neighbors are anarchists and nihilists who feel it's their human right to flush their tampons, condoms, and other unmentionables.

But instead of weeping or ranting, I have a simple suggestion for those who want to improve our lives and honor the earth:

Invent better toilets.



Postscript: Is It Fair? Is It Foul?

Every year, when it's Mardi Gras season in my neck of the woods, some revelers are arrested for having sex in the port-a-potties. It's usually reported that they were doing their acts while standing up.

Obviously, they've saved space. They've acted nobly against overpopulation. They've also taken meaningful steps to ensure safe, sanitary disposal of unwanted, um, stuff.

Of course, they're usually considered degenerates and debauchees—but perhaps they are really an avant garde, brave, heroic group, our new saviors of the earth.

They are the Saints of Sanitation.

Art Information

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Emily Toth is a contributing writer at *Talking Writing*. Her column "Nothing but the Toth" appears regularly in TW. She's also a Louisiana-based novelist and nonfiction writer who writes "Ms. Mentor," the online academic advice column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and has published biographies of Kate Chopin and Grace Metalious.

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