July15, 2009

To Executive Policy Committee and Visitors

I distinctly remember that blustery March 22 in 2006 at noon when I was part of a rally in the courtyard of City Hall. It was World Water day. Some of us came guardedly hopeful that the water declaration would be approved by City Council even though several city counsillors who gave commitments to bring the motion forward did not do so in the previous weeks. The crowd was sombre during the Aboriginal Water Blessing and the political speeches that followed.

The Development and Peace animateur from Mexico City was at *alternate* World Water Forum. She sent an email that morning and I was amazed that the crowd geared when I read these words "International financial institutions such as the World Bank, corporations such as Suez, Vivendi, Coca Cola and leaders of many governments insist that privatizing water services is the most valid solution to the world's water problems." Clearly, the audience understood that far too many privatization schemes have made water less accessible and worsened already critical situations around the world. Water issues resonate deeply with Winnipeggers.

Later that day, City Council unanimously accepted the Water Declaration. They agreed that:

> ***Water is a sacred gift that connects all life***
> ***Access to clean water is a basic human right***
> ***The value of the Earth's fresh water to the common good takes priority over any possible commercial value***
> ***Fresh water is a shared legacy, a public trust and a collective responsibility***

Early November, Development and Peace hosted a movie and discussion about social justice issues in Darfur. This unexpected comment from the audience surprised me. "As a journalist, I believe that we need to have a collective voice about global injustice, but we also need to investigate and immediately spread the word around about the impending privatization of our Winnipeg water and waste utilities that the Major and Executive Council seem intent on doing without meaningful public consultation".

I was caught off guard. This was the first time that I heard this news even though I try to stay informed about water issues both locally and globally. A few weeks later, concerned citizens and organizations came to council chambers and had their suspicions confirmed that a preordained process was already in motion that would likely make our water and wastewater utility less public and more private. That day our Major also placed a ban on that "P" word. I intuitively believe, like many others, that it was feared that this charged word could and probably would arouse that primal protective inclination of many Winnipeggers to guard their water and waste utilities as a public good rather than leave it vulnerable to the exploitive practices of corporatization.

I believe that democracy should be synonymous with transparency. I was hoping that Winnipeggers would finally be able to engage in a meaningful dialogue at the public consultations. But I was deeply disappointed that this gathering was merely a storyboard show case that did not permit any interactive *group* dialogue that could embrace collective wisdom and informed grassroots democracy.

At a recent funeral, a friend asked me about how things were evolving in the fight to keep our water system entirely public. He wondered why Executive Council would remain so blinded to

the well documented and inevitable progression over time of selling off more and more of public utilities camouflaged as municipal corporations. He was perplexed that Council seemed not to have diligently done their home work or care about the many obvious profound and enduring negative consequences that have befallen ALL the privatized water utilities that have journeyed this path before us in Canada and throughout the world. What could explain such profound blindness?

He is not alone in his wondering. 250 people attended the democratic gathering hosted by the Council of Women on Monday, July 13, 2009. The audience geared at some of the answers provided by Brian Gray. The Council's secretive and misleading ways have become bewildering and abhorrent to a growing number of increasingly vocal Winnipeggers.

I know that there is a proven better way. I recall several years ago that I was channel surfing after a exhausting workday hoping to find some light entertainment. Instead I was captivated by a live telecast from Cochabamba, Bolivia where the people were pouring into the streets by the thousands to protest against the hardships they were enduring since the privatization of their water. There were beatings, leaders were taken from their houses in the middle of the night, and a 17 year old boy was killed by the army. People remained undaunted in their resolve to overturn the contract with the World Bank in spite of exorbitant penalties so that their children and grandchildren would be free from a devastating legacy of privatized water. They decided to publicly face off with the Bechtel Water Corporation " *We will not wage this fight behind closed doors where only a handful of lawyers has a voice. We will wage this fight on your doorstep. We will make you defend your actions in the court of world public opinion, before your neighbours, your friends, and the media*". Their surrender settlement is historic and this was the first time that a major corporation backed down as a result of public pressure.

Last year there was a bold move by Uruguay to insert legislation directly into its constitution that prohibits the privatization of water and all public utilities. I believe that Bolivia and Uruguay are stellar, courageous, progressive, guiding examples to us.

Sacred scripture has a story about the prophet Samuel and the priest Eli. It is a convoluted tale woven with mysticism and intrigue. Several millennia later we again have a Mayor Sam(uel) and Chief Eli from the Aboriginal community at Shoal Lake as authors of an evolving script. I am prayerful that their narrative unfolds to be a blessing and not a tragedy.

Why did I choose storytelling as the way to share with you things that passionately come from the depths of my being? I expect that most presenters will try to have a meeting of minds through logical reasoning and this too is very good. However, most of my work lately has been with the Aboriginal community. I have found that powerful lessons can be learnt and even at times hearts can be transformation through storytelling. I believe that more than logic is needed to realign the underpinnings of decision making by Council on this issue. A culture that clings to the notion that ***business always does it is better*** needs to shift to one that embraces ***the best interests of the common good in the long run*** for Winnipeggers.

Corporatization is an unnecessay slippery slope. Our current water and wastewater utilities, though imperfect, work very well. Improve what needs changing but keep the current structure. **Keep our water and wastewater utilities fully public – NO Corporatization and NO P3.**
Diana Ludwick