

## Ending the winter of my discontent

Sue Stanton | Apr. 20, 2014

Viewpoint

It's not as if I wasn't warned ahead of time. On Dec. 13, 2013, a contrite man stood telling me that the rod and gun club my husband had booked for the staff Christmas party would not be able to accommodate our 50-plus guests.

"What? I can't believe this!" I sat in the truck with a load of Crock-Pots and drinks in the back seat. "What do you mean we can't use the hall? I've got people coming in an hour!"

"The water's froze up, lady. We weren't expecting it so soon this winter. It's been awful cold, you know."

I was relieved. "Oh, I don't need water," I blundered on. "I'll take everything back home and clean it when we're done. We have plenty of drinks. We won't need to turn on the tap. We've even brought our own wood." I must have sounded slightly hysterical to him, but he didn't seem to care that I might break down in tears at any second.

"That's not the problem, lady. It's the other end you don't have. The sewer line is frozen up and without that you're stuck."

Well, that last word was the bleeped edition of what he really said, but I took no offense because that old English word was exactly what I was.

My husband held on to his rationality and quickly found another place for our party, where things like toilets flushed freely. But it was only the beginning.

Slowly, like a plague, we began to hear stories. So-and-so decided to move south for three months; a city north of us asked its residents to let the taps drip slowly all the time; pipes were bursting in a small town to the west of us; folks down our gravel road had a drain company come and shoot something up their pipes that allowed them to live in their house. Another couple moved into a hotel.

Thanks be to God, we made it through the Christmas holiday, a New Year's Eve party, and the birth celebration of a new grandchild. But then flu season hit alongside life at 50 below zero. My sister in Kentucky called to tell me that Ames, Iowa, was now colder than Alaska.

One late afternoon, my husband and our plumber lay on top of the snow in minus-13 weather, gazing down into one of two septic tanks. "You're frozen up." Kevin the plumber told us. "Don't flush anymore."

Ever optimistic, since this had never happened to me before in my life, I asked, "How long does this last?"

He delivered the news like a knife slash. "Till spring," he said. "The frost line froze 5 feet deep this year. Usually it's 2."

In one month, we went from using 4,000 gallons of water to 561. We had the tank pumped out and now wait, ever so patiently, for our resurrection, the kind that rises the water in the back of the toilet tank.

During this winter of our discontent, we have learned the lessons that only precious Sister Water can teach us. I can brush my teeth and wash my hands without turning the tap on full blast and they get just as clean. I can scrub my floors with gray water, one load of laundry uses 40 gallons of water, a water-saving toilet uses one, and I can bathe and wash my hair (with conditioner) using only three. I can live easily without my dishwasher, since we only use paper plates and use them for heating the house when we are through. The power of scented candles, lemon lotions and lavender bath powder cannot be underestimated.

Whether we have learned anything from this personal chapter in weather adaptation, only time can tell. For Lent, I gave up complaining about global warming, climate change, forecasts of disasters, and all dire predictions of the future of the planet. I cannot control any of those things.

Instead, I have turned my ever-inquisitive brain to extreme mindfulness. I have become, shall we say, downright pathological about the use of the water -- a resource I have taken for granted in so many ways all of my life. I can truly say that, before this winter of such discontent, I couldn't have cared less what happened to my water once I was done with it. It disappeared into the ground, flowing away into the darkness of a world I do not have time to be concerned with. After all, that job is for another to sort out. Right?

But now, Lent is over and as the pipes loosen and my sewage flows freely again, I will sing alleluia this Easter season with a vigor and joy I have not felt since the day my grandchild was born -- the one single blessing of this truly awful and historic winter for us all.

And watch out, world. As that holy anthem rises, let the complaining about climate change begin!

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