



BALLE BEAT

Leanne Krueger-Braneky

IT IS THE FAUCET that gets me. I have noticed that we socially conscious types have our pet peeves: some people cannot stand to see leftover food thrown out and must pack every crumb into a PVC-free reusable container. Others dig recyclable materials out of trash bins, redirecting the misplaced aluminum and plastics to the appropriate recycling receptacle. For me, it's the faucet left running, or the leaky valve that drip, drip, drips away lost gallons of clean water. To be honest, it is symbolic: seeing water wasted reminds me of how hard people work to get water, and other basic necessities, in other parts of the world.

Before I started working with the local BALLE network in Philadelphia, I spent a year living in South Africa where I saw firsthand the need for an international local living economy movement — a movement that connects people around the globe in a struggle towards a living wage for all workers and an economic system that acknowledges the value of both natural systems and human life. In South Africa, I saw the power of worker cooperatives and the exponential impact of even a microgrant in a community. I was privileged to live with families from multiple ethnic backgrounds and economic levels, but it took little girls from a rural village to teach me the

value of water.

I spent a week living in a rural village in the Eastern Cape. The family who hosted me did not have electricity or running water. They lived in round structures built from hand and cooked their meals over an outdoor fire fueled by cow dung. Most of their food came from the surrounding fields and the young boys spent their time herding the family's livestock. Drinking water was collected through pipes that caught rainwater from the roofs. This system was effective, but did not provide enough water for the family's daily needs.

So every day the girls would gather up their buckets, balance them on their heads and trek down to the nearest water source, a good five kilometers each way. They would not allow me to make the trip with them — I think I would have slowed them down — but on one trip through the area someone pointed out the water source. Resting on the bank lay an abandoned car rust-

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ing into the water. And while my mind flickered to what possible contaminants the water contained, I watched more girls come to the water's edge to fill their buckets.

I picture these girls when my bathtub faucet leaks. I see them when I walk into a public restroom and notice that someone forgot to turn off the spigot at the sink. I think about them when I fill my glass with water and don't feel like finishing the last

CONNECTED BY A GLASS OF WATER

gulp and on good days, I remember them before I mindlessly pour it down the sink.

Interconnectedness is key to building a living economy — we need to know how other people live and how our choices affect them. When we operate in a vacuum, the world is in trouble — when we buy clothing without knowledge or care of how our sisters are treated in a factory where the garment was made.

It boils down to relationships. I have learned that it's important to connect with people from different parts of the globe, and to sit at their feet when they are ready to tell their stories. I need to let go of my urge to speak first, and instead be willing to listen. Whether I am conversing over a meal or watching a documentary, I need to let these stories get inside me. Because when I can picture the face of the woman in the factory, or the guerrilla fighting injustice, it is harder for me to ignore their reality and my possible complicitness in the situation.

I admit that it is not easy for everyone to develop relationships with people from the developing world — not everyone has the luxury to travel. These days, though, we are lucky because the developing world has come to us. International students study at most universities around the U.S. — we can start by building relationships with them. Documentaries and memoirs about life in other countries are easy to find. A whole world of international news is available on the Internet at a few clicks of the mouse and while the stories may not be carried in my local daily paper, it does not take much effort for me to find them. My job is to care enough to seek out the stories that are not on the front page. □

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