

Prologue

The thought ‘We are doing it wrong’ kept sneaking in on me at the most inconvenient times and places. The mounting pressure of this thought was like a scratching wool shirt on me. I suspected the good I intended to do was not as good as I had hoped. Could even be harming.

Such thoughts are like imagined ghosts. A fast glance under the bed always assured me that there was nothing there. I reassured myself I was doing my best; quick to leave the troubling feelings behind. And I continued into the noise and rumble of everyday professional life. I felt I was pushing boundaries in all directions. Exhausting myself in attempts to make things better, to make things work, to make the feeling go away. But despite the enormous energy I put into my work, I lacked the inner sense of happiness with the results. They did not ring clear-true with me.

As the ghosts kept reappearing and I kept de-imagining them, a weariness came over me. It felt as if a life force inside me was dwindling. Hardly noticeable from day to day but accumulating. To a point where I realised that I had to confront the problems head on.

So, in this safe space of letters on pages, I now start a new attempt in my search for a better relationship with water. An attempt of a different nature. I will muster the courage to call upon the ghosts. Attempt to break off from the main road and push my way into the roadside wilderness. Try to find a new pathway where I have not walked before – in the search for ‘it’.

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I had just finalised the book *Smart Water Utilities* with Professor Gustaf Olsson when I reached the above conclusion. We had found a simple way to integrate sensors, models, controls, automation, goal hierarchies etc. into an easy

conceptual model. The conceptual model of Measure-Analyse-Decide effectively organised the ‘smart’ in ‘smart water utilities’. We interpreted the ‘smart’-component as a brain-like layer on top of the physical assets of water and wastewater utilities.

This structure made it clear how to integrate the water cycle; seamlessly integrating the natural and the societal part of it. The concept organised the change towards ‘smart water utilities’ into a step-by-step process. I was pleased with the result because it had that satisfying feeling of something falling into place. Everything had come together and found rest in a larger satisfying pattern. Years of working with water in different contexts and from different perspectives finally found resolution and rest.

I think that the calmness that followed the publication of the book allowed for this new different feeling to surface. I felt that while I had an understanding of how ‘to do water smart’, I missed a different dimension. It had been missing all along, but it was not until now that I could perceive its absence. My troubling understanding was that I lacked the ability ‘to do water’ in harmony with my emotional landscape and my more ‘spiritual’ aspirations. There was an unintended ‘coldness’ to the rational intelligence of ‘smart water utilities’. I had this unspoken feeling of something out of place, something lacking, something not seen.

When I opened this question to Gustaf Olsson, he responded:

‘Water is something holy. We may say that there are many things that our life depends on. Water, food, comfort, some energy ... Still, water is so special. Look at the sea surface, and you will get amazed. It does not have to do with the extension of the area – you will never feel the same if you see a huge dry field. The scale of water is not important. Think about the very incomparable sacred feeling that you will get in the Scandinavian mountains when you can drink the water from a little creek. If there is water close by, you are attracted to go there or sit there, even if it is a very small stream. And, as you know, the Bible talks about “living water”, and everybody at that time understood the meaning of it.

I have often wondered: does it make any difference even if I would find the best control method in the world for treating wastewater? Well, if my purpose is to experience to recover that “holy” water what should be my path? In professional life, we often look at water more like a commodity than the matter that all life is depending on. Of course, it is important to treat it well – still, that water is not as “holy” as the clear water you experience in the little creek.

Once many years ago, I learnt from a Japanese monk how the water in one little bucket was used wisely to the last drop in his morning ceremony. First to drink, then to wash the body piece by piece, all the time using the same water but for uses that asked for less and less quality of the water. Every drop was used in the best possible way. We have so much to learn!’

This was not a topic we had explored before, so I was happy to hear that my ‘problem’ also resonated with my mentor for many years.

However, I would probably not have taken my discomforts seriously to the extent of writing a book, if not for Tina Monberg. Tina Monberg is a visionary mediator and has followed me on this path for several years now. She has the rare ability to create a safe space, where doubts and discomforts can be explored. At the time, Tina was helping me bring mediation into my leadership role. Mediation is a process of peaceful conflict resolution based on natural decision processes. I wanted to integrate this mindset into my leadership work as a basic principle for the resolution of conflicts on all layers: personal, interpersonal and systemic.

Kalundborg Utility was going through a significant change process; a process that posed complex questions of systemic as well as personal and interpersonal character. I was determined to succeed with my leadership role in a mild, generative and peaceful way. The process of learning mediation was challenging. It required me to understand my internal workings as well as gaining a deeper level of empathy for other’s feelings. With this work, I was ‘swimming upstream in myself’. I worked backwards and inwards to understand my drives most importantly in relation to my water vocation. When I finally came around to formulating this, she responded:

‘I sense that more and more people are looking to the horizon, looking for a glint, a wisdom, an insight, and I believe that this search for the subtle in the extraordinary world will enable us to effect a collective emergence, so that we as a community will be able – on the spur of the moment – to see and manifest a new image, that we can share with each other.’

‘Until then, we must be compassionate with ourselves as we bang our heads walking into invisible walls.’

The responses from Gustaf and Tina strengthened my resolve to delve into this question, to find out how to move into a better relationship with water; a relationship that is more graceful, integrated and whole. A relationship where we show gratitude, respect and modesty. Throughout the search for this new relationship to water, Gustaf and Tina have been supportive companions. In a sense, they are invisible co-authors to this book.

Through the process, I came to understand that one thing is doing things ‘smart’, but even if intelligence in the form of smart, big-data, industry 4.0 etc. is a huge step forward, this in itself will not be enough. There is a higher meaning with our work life, a higher purpose and a moral obligation. At this point in history, we must do better than ‘smart’ or ‘intelligent’. We need to hit a higher tune of poetic beauty in what we do.

Money has been an effective organising principle for collaboration across the globe. Science has provided a tremendous learning experience that has propelled us into a new more profound understanding of the world, unprecedented in our

evolutionary history. 'Unprecedented' seems to be a modest word for the revolution that has happened within the last few generations; a revolution that has left no aspect of human life untouched. And to our horror has left no aspect of natural life unharmed.

As water technology becomes more and more advanced and refined, 'everything becomes possible'. Our technological options provide us with so many options. But at the same time, to have gained access to that power requires us to be transparent in our aims; to ensure benevolent use of that power. Water is a primary substance of life; hence, we influence life directly in our interaction. Our own internal story about water invisibly governs our decisions and actions with water. We need to spend time and attention in reflecting upon the future of water. As water has become a vital topic of the perilous global sustainability crises, this need becomes ever more acute. As technology gets better, we need to upgrade our moral, emotional, spiritual professional selves as well. My findings lead me to believe that this marks a transition from water professionals to water stewards.

However, before discussing what is not working well in our current state, we must recognise that the industrial revolution was not carried out of spite and evil and the results are not solely disastrous. On the contrary, most people have benefitted from fantastic progress. The heavy hand of a plethora of diseases has been lifted. The world has experienced an incredible increase in wealth. The internet has provided almost free availability of an ever-increasing domain of shared knowledge. The decrease in human violence has continued. But underneath this gushing forward of comforts and benefits, a discomfiting sound has appeared. And this discomfiting sound has grown loud enough for a new disorientation. There is a sense that something new and different is underway. 'Smart' or 'intelligence' has to be supplemented by something of a different dimension. Something in the direction of 'wisdom', 'the best of humanity', 'a caring respect for nature' and 'poetic beauty'.

It appears increasingly evident that a change is in its waking, and that this transformation happens everywhere. I wanted to understand the change, the drive for change and how it could be applicable to our relationship with water. This book is a manifestation of that understanding.