NAVIGATING THE MAINSTREAM: THE CHALLENGE OF MAKING WATER ISSUES MATTER

By J. Carl Ganter

High on the rim of the geologic bowl that is home to the 24 million residents of Mexico City, the dusk presses down over the smoggy brown haze. The nighttime yelps of street dogs ripple from rooftop to tarpaper rooftop. Like a sonic tidal wave, canine communications echo up the shores of this former lakebed and dissipate into the heavy air.

These are the sounds of the barrios in one of the world's largest metropolitan areas, where millions struggle daily for life's basic necessities. Many have come to the city in search of work, displaced from water-stressed regions such as Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Tehuacán. Here in Colonia San Miguel, a neighborhood in the Mexico City municipality of Iztapalapa, water systems struggle to keep up with burgeoning demand.

It's just after lunch on Valentine's Day. A clapboard door along the street swings open to reveal a muddy stoop of three adjacent shacks where Fidel and Emilia Silva are getting their grandchildren ready for school.

Carlos and Luis, seven and eight years old, grab their pencils and skip ahead of Fidel and Emilia. They wind through the churchyard and past cramped *panería* and tortilla shops before reaching the heavy steel gate that separates the playground from the busy city street. Emilia hugs the boys and Fidel watches proudly as teachers greet the children and disappear inside. The pride in his eyes soon turns to a grandfather's pain as he notices that other children clutch flowers in tiny hands, humble gifts for their teachers. He'd forgotten this Valentine's Day tradition. Quietly distraught, he finds a corner vendor selling red roses and buys two. He begs for the attention of the schoolmaster, who unlocks the chain on the gate and promises to deliver the roses to Carlos and Luis's teachers.

Back at the Silvas' austere home, Emilia hangs clothes out to dry. Many of her neighbors live side-by-side in cramped shacks made of corroded metal sheets, decaying tarpaper, and cement bricks. Most pieces of the homes are scavenged from junk piles, and electricity comes from a spiderweb of wires clipped dangerously to power lines above.

To Emilia's side, five rusting containers hold about 200 gallons of turbid water near her makeshift kitchen and laundry tubs. These tanks must supply enough water for the family's needs for the entire week.

The water flows for only one hour from a fragile plastic tube emerging from the dirt, and that single hour comes only once every seven days, says Fidel, sitting on the edge of a stone wall where similar shanties interlock like stair steps 20 feet below. Sunday morning, about one o'clock, the water trickles out, he says, precious for washing clothes, bathing, and flushing the toilet when they can no longer stand the reek. But this trickle is not safe to drink.

Vendors travel daily throughout the neighborhoods, passing on the street just below, yelling, "Water for sale!" They sell five-gallon containers of water for seven and a half pesos (about 71 cents). For Emilia, the expense can be a crippling portion of the family's income, which is derived from odd jobs and her daughter-in-law's work at the *lechería*, a nearby dairy.

The evening darkness brings warnings of street gangs, and even the dogs are on edge, nipping and snarling at strangers. While the family eats a handful of tortillas and boiled meat before bedtime, Emilio latches the street-side door with a thin strand of wire, a meager gesture of security against the threats of the night.

A PROLIFERATION OF NEED

For all the advances of the new millennium, 1 of every 6 people still labors to carry water to their home, and 1 in 3—like the Silva family—lives in an area of moderate to high water stress, generally in the same regions where population growth is the highest.[1]

"A communications and computer revolution is sweeping the globe," writes Peter H. Gleick (2000), co-founder of the Pacific Institute for Studies in Development, Environment, and Security, in his biennial report, *The World's Water*. "International financial markets and industries are increasingly integrated and connected. Efforts are being made to ensure regional and global security. In this context, our inability to meet the most basic water requirements of billions of people has resulted in enormous human suffering and tragedy and is one of the 20th century's greatest failures" (page 15).

Projections of freshwater supplies worldwide warn that resources will not meet the proliferation of need, which is spurred by the pressures of population, industry, agriculture, climate change, and the excesses of waste. Increasing incidents of shortage, from New Delhi to New England to Mexico, provide glimpses of a world water crisis that is advancing inexorably upon civilization, gathering menace with every step.

OF WILL AND LEADERSHIP

Why, then, does water fail to rally a forceful, sustained response from the collective global consciousness? It is not an absence of solutions, or even a lack of opportunities. In his book *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed,* Pulitzer Prize-winning scientist Jared Diamond argues that civilization is poised at a unique, perilous moment in history. While we face threats of a scale unimagined by our ancestors, we also hold the keys to survival: the technology to solve our problems, and the ability to communicate the solutions and the sense of urgency.

"We are not beset by insoluble problems," says Diamond (2005). "While we do face big risks, the most serious ones are not ones beyond our control…The future is up for grabs, lying in our own hands. We don't need new technologies to solve our problems; while new technologies can make some contribution, for the most part we 'just'

1. In Iztapalapa, most of the infrastructure to bring water to families like the Silvas exists, but the deep supply wells, according to engineers who provided a tour of the region, cannot keep up with demand. Mexico City's wealthier neighborhoods rely on the constant flow of the Cutzamala water system, massive pipelines winding into the city from dams like the one in Valle de Bravo, 95 miles away.

need the political will to apply solutions already available" (pages 521–522).

Political will, that potent elusive force, flows in both directions. It can build from the ground up or arc from on high—from the pressure of public opinion or the impetus of leadership. It can be a flash storm or a slow sea change in the climate of self-governance.

As many pundits have shown, predicting (or influencing) political will is about as easy as divining the weather. Favorable conditions for action often meet with unforeseen events, or underestimated fronts. Authentic, focused, and productive political will requires the same sort of concatenation of circumstances needed for the perfect storm.

Average citizens, the fundamental units of public opinion, are often too preoccupied with the daily demands of life, whether that is finding food and water, working two jobs to support a family (or lifestyle), participating in local issues, or being distracted by other needs and wants. Unless water issues directly affect their lives—and as long as safe and affordable water comes through the tap—people tend to take water as a given.

WATER: NOT ON THE TABLE

"In the developed world, average people are not substantively engaged in the water issues that are defining the quality of their lives," says Karin Krchnak, co-chair of the Global Water Partnership and director of international freshwater programs for The Nature Conservancy. "While many coordinated efforts of NGOs and governments around the world strive to protect our fragile freshwater systems, their efforts fall short. Broad-platform public awareness and support remain woefully inadequate to mobilize the necessary political will on the largest scale" (personal communication, July 2004).

In their critical evaluation of the "post-environmental" world, 2004's "The Death of Environmentalism," strategists Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus observe that even though most Americans are concerned about their environment, it is not a priority. This personal perspective is reflected in the political realm, where environmentalism has, in essence, atrophied into a special interest. It no longer captures the popular attention. Without a public mandate, environmental concerns fail to command action in society, even when the dangers are great and the solutions are accessible.

Mark Van Putten, founder of Conservation Strategies in Washington, D.C., wrote in 2004:

> *The missing ingredient is leadership....We know most (but not all) of what the problems are and a good deal about where they are. We have knowledge and expertise to begin to tackle them. We have developed excellent concepts, such as equity and sustainability. Yet inertia at leadership level, and a world population not fully aware of the scale of the problem (and in many cases not sufficiently empowered to do much about it) means we fail to take the timely corrective actions and put the concepts to work. (page 29)*

This "leadership inertia" has similar roots to the inertia of the citizenry. A water crisis is subtle, not sexy. It's not a mainstream topic. It is slow to unfold, hard to comprehend, and, until the taps run dry, not very relevant to the very people who have the most power to avert it. Additionally, political and economic leaders have an incentive not to draw attention to the fact that freshwater is vanishing at an astonishing rate: fear of the politi-

cal fallout should the public seize upon the notion of a world water crisis.

Peter Goldmark (2001), former chairman and CEO of the *International Herald Tribune*, claims that powerful forces conspire to keep important issues such as water off the table. "In the case of the environment, a strange and uneasy alliance of business and government—often fierce antagonists in other arenas—simply does not want to face the scale, cost, and dislocation implied by the changed models of economic production and consumption that would be required to respond seriously to environmental deterioration" (page 8).

The inextricable corollary to safe drinking water—sanitation—is even more vexing to communicate. For example, the cost of cleaning up the United States' Great Lakes is estimated at $20 billion. But few members of advocacy groups see straightforward ways to raise the funds required to fix aging municipal sewer systems and other mostly invisible—but crucial—threats to the 20 percent of the world's freshwater stored in the lakes.

AGGREGATING AN ISSUE

Mayer Zald, an authority on social change and professor emeritus at the University of Michigan, is one of the founders of the "resource mobilization" approach to the study of social movements, which he says can be applied to issues like water: "As long as [the water issue] doesn't aggregate, it will be dispersed within local issues. It won't be transformed into a kind of call for broader policies and long-term issues, rather than just a problem of X state and X city. Getting that aggregation is in some ways the challenge" (personal communication, June 24, 2004).

Playing a part in that aggregation—reaching the public mandate—are two entities that work in the realm between the individual and the government: NGOs and the news media. In the boardrooms and in the trenches, NGOs have been hammering away at the policies, programs, and perceptions that frame humanity's response to water concerns.

LACKING A PUBLIC CONSTITUENCY

Shellenberger and Nordhaus struck a nerve in the NGO world when they asserted in "Death of Environmentalism" that environmental organizations were out of touch with mainstream values, acting symptomatically instead of holistically, unable to grapple with the symbiosis of policy and politics. The introduction to *U.S. in the World: Talking Global Issues with Americans* also made this point:

> *The sense of urgency we feel today has led us and others working on global issues to acknowledge that whatever we have been doing to reach out to the American public, and however successful we have been in engaging citizens in discrete policy debates, it is simply not enough. At a time when our country faces fundamental questions of national identity and purpose, we still lack a broad, bipartisan public constituency for pragmatic, principled, effective, and cooperative U.S. global engagement. (Heinz & Isaacson, 2004, page 3)*

It will be informative to follow the progress of the Water for the Poor Act, which President George W. Bush signed into law on December 1, 2005. The Act makes increasing affordable, equi-

table access to safe water and sanitation a major purpose of U.S. foreign assistance efforts. It calls for increased funding for water and sanitation, and supports innovative funding mechanisms, greater international coordination, and better integration of water and sanitation into other development efforts. Finally, it requires the secretary of State to develop a strategy to meet specific goals and benchmarks on the way to halving the percentage of people without access to safe water and sanitation.[2]

Passed in the House by a vote of 319–34, the Act is the first bill to write a United Nations Millennium Development Goal into law. The National Wildlife Federation (2005), which played an active role in the bill's process, declared it "a victory for people and wildlife worldwide," and with the current administration's reach of influence, the potential is great. But if there is no attempt to sustain political will, those close to the legislation fear that it will exist only as unfunded window-dressing—a curtain, perhaps, obscuring the greater need for action.

MIA IN THE MEDIA

A Google search conducted six weeks after the bill was signed, and using the terms "Water for the Poor Act" and "Bush," turned up 212 matches—none of them from news organizations, whose role in our self-governing society is to alert and inform its citizens. Many people directly and indirectly involved in the legislation's process privately lamented the lack of media interest in the bill, as well as the failure of organizers to use established channels to widely spread the news.

With neighbors' help, this resident of San Juan Tlacotenco and her family built a dry sanitation outhouse.

Water NGOs, by their nature, promote an agenda, with specific behaviors, policies, and goals in mind. The news media have a different role to play, and it includes creating a platform for public discussion. Known as the Fourth Estate, the free press has traditionally served as a balance to the three branches of government, a watchdog to ensure accountability. Its role in the democratic process is profound: to inform and enlighten citizens without fear or favor, to frame the issues of the day, and to explore the concerns of tomorrow. Traditionally, journalists have professed to adhere to a code of unbiased and balanced reportage. Today, the distinction between news and opinion, between information and entertainment, has been blurred, and the public is increasingly left to determine fact or fiction on its own.

2. For more information on the Water for the Poor Act, see U.S. Representative Earl Blumenauer's website, at http://blumenauer.house.gov/Issues/ Issue.aspx?SubIssueID=129

A number of factors come into play: the consolidation of the media—owned by fewer and increasingly powerful, homogenous entities; a push for higher revenues and lower costs (making coverage of complex, long-term global issues difficult); the resulting tendency to offer coverage that is an "easy sell," favoring sensationalism over substance.

"They're in a competitive business," observes Tom Brokaw, recently retired from his 21-year anchor position at "NBC Nightly News." The pressure is intense to generate an audience, he said, sitting on the sofa in his Rockefeller Center office:

> *You're not in the business to drive viewers away, you're in a business to get people to watch you. You can't get around that reality. News ought not to be just about 'eat your spinach.' I was looking at the* New York Times *today—the very dramatic picture on the front page, they've gone to color, they're finding very striking photographs. They're not doing that because they think this is in the interest of journalistic purity. They're doing it because they're in a heated battle to retain circulation, and to get people to keep coming back to the paper. So it is always that funny little Faustian bargain that you have to make. (personal communication, June 8, 2005)*

TROUBLE WITH "HEAVY" ISSUES

The media's balancing act discourages coverage of "heavy" issues such as the environment, social justice, and economics—all of which relate to water. According to Peter Goldmark (2001), good journalists "help frame the terms of public debate and they leave behind benchmarks against which future actions and utterances by public leaders are measured, and we are not doing that now. We are not covering the real movement of the tectonic plates in the landscape around us" (page 13).

Photojournalist Brent Stirton, a South African who has covered most recent wars, famines, and major international news events for Getty Images, agrees. "Our leaders are not focused enough on water resources. We're living in a false paradise and there will be consequences. In Mexico, for example, you can make the direct connection between a lack of water in rural areas, a consequent lack of opportunity, and increasing migration toward the U.S." (personal communication, February 23, 2006).

The proliferation of news sources, from network broadcasts to online podcasts, offers a multiplicity of information and perspectives that may further burden citizens who are already distancing themselves from an overload of data. Americans no longer have a Walter Cronkite to tell them "the way it is" by prioritizing and editing the concerns of life. In effect, the informational evening meal has been transformed into the all-you-can-eat buffet. The fries are always hot, and no one will force you to eat the spinach.

Carlos Silva plays near the tanks that hold his family's week-long supply of freshwater.

REACHING FOR THE MAINSTREAM

When do water issues reach into the mainstream, the fertile environment for political will? A good story—something with drama that rises above the background hum—will capture attention. An event, tragic or amazing, that tells us something about ourselves as a people—the flooding of New Orleans, the East Asia tsunami can offer a compelling, though regrettably fleeting, public frame for larger issues. In the case of the tsunami, the larger, long-term story was nearly missed and is already fading from the radar screen.

"One of the things the tsunami has shown us is how absolutely vital water is to every aspect to human survival, from the prevention of disease to simply providing drinking water so people can live," Peter Gleick (2005) told National Public Radio's "Morning Edition." "But it's also shown us that large numbers of people who live in the tsunami-affected areas not only don't have clean drinking water and sanitation, but they haven't had it for a long time. They've never had it. Ironically, in the countries hardest hit by the tsunami, there are and have been 200 million people without access to clean drinking water on a day-to-day basis anyway."

LINKING AND FRAMING VALUES

Water—often tagged simply an "environment," "health," or "social justice" concern—cannot be reduced to a subset of life, as it is inextricably linked to every aspect. From economy to gender equality to border security, water is not just an environmental issue.

The failure of current environmentalism, Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2004) hold, is a failure to find "deeper causes or connections with other root causes" (page 15). They believe we need to reunite what is pigeonholed as "environmental" with all the other aspects of everyday life, building upon the core values that influence behavior, politics, and policy. But this goes against the established practices of the day: "In their public campaigns, not one of America's environmental leaders is articulating a vision of the future commensurate with the magnitude of the crisis. Instead they are promoting…proposals that provide neither the popular inspiration nor the political alliances the community needs to deal with the problem" (page 6).

NEW PARADIGMS, SOCIAL CHANGES

Making water stewardship a mainstream concern of the global community requires nothing short of a new paradigm for social change. This paradigm must recognize the needs and unite the strengths of citizens, leaders, NGOs, and the news media.

This new approach emphasizes relevance, establishes an appropriate scope, creates or identifies major events, involves varied talents and disciplines, develops new uses of proven techniques, and pioneers communications and information tools. This paradigm should draw strength from societal values and involve new, coordinated "power constituencies" such as business and popular culture—and it should cultivate hope for a better future.

It seems inconceivable that nations and individuals would not be deeply concerned with the welfare of our water supplies. But in his bestselling book *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell (2000) points out that an idea—for example, water stewardship—is only the germ of human communication. Every important issue needs a "tipping point" to effect change. "Ideas and products and messages and behaviors spread just like viruses do…In order to be capable of sparking epidemics,

ideas have to be memorable and move us to action"(page 7). They must be spread by the right people, in the right form, under the right conditions.

TELLING STORIES, MAKING IT PERSONAL

One sure way to make water issues meaningful to people is by telling good stories. "You can take on these subjects and do them in a way that will be appealing to people, that will get them involved in it," says Tom Brokaw (personal communication, June 8, 2005). "You've got to make it personal. The abstract is wonderful if you're sitting in a library in an academy somewhere, or you're on an airplane by yourself and you're reading it, but the attention span of the American news consumer, print or electronic, these days is in milliseconds, so you have to reach out and get 'em. Journalism's always about storytelling. It always is. Watergate was a whodunnit."

Beyond journalism's ability to engage citizens, of course, is its power to reach them in sufficient numbers. Successfully modifying collective behavior requires "collaborative action on a global scale," Goldmark maintains (2001, page 11). "And that cannot happen and will not happen without the indispensable fuel, the critical catalyst of independent journalism."

BEYOND THE "NEWS HOOK"

A successful approach to social change must recognize the power of events to frame issues and to initiate mass movements, and offer newsworthy "hooks" for public attention. The news media thrives on compelling content, and the number of stories that put a face on water issues is as great as the ways in which water touches our lives. Truly imaginative and extraordinary events that speak to the "adventure" of confronting water challenges are powerful opportunities for awareness.

Earth Day 1970 "galvanized environmentalism into the national consciousness," writes Andrew J. Hoffman (quoted in Zald, 2004, page 29). Such attention raises the public profile of NGOs, which are established resources for identifying problems and presenting solutions. Independent events such as Live AID and "We Are the World" garnered coverage as legitimate news stories, but also provided a neutral zone for groups to collaborate, creating a critical mass that increased impact.

Of course, in the interest of journalistic integrity, a strict separation must be maintained between the news media and any entity that has an agenda other than engaging and informing citizens. A forum for public discourse encourages all ideas; those that public values most will represent the common will.

A SPECTRUM OF TALENT AND PASSION

Raising the profile of water requires a new approach, one that will counter the special interest "environment" label by connecting water to all fields—from education to economics, from social security to national security. Unlike narrow "policy fix" orientations, this approach would seek to explore the areas where water intersects with all aspects of life, tapping the expertise of all sectors of society.

To create a social movement—within the disparate organizations, cultures, and issues related to water—activities should involve an unprecedented spectrum of talent and passion, including leading communicators, scholars, and professionals. They should embrace the widest channels of social dialogue, from the fine arts to popular culture.

Such coverage of water issues should naturally include emerging communication trends such as

blogging and other channels. In his article "Abandoning the News," Merrill Brown (2005), former editor-in-chief and senior vice president of MSNBC.com, relates the findings of a study of 18–29 year-olds: "What the survey data (gathered by Carnegie Corporation of New York)—as well as the message that's coming in loud and clear from bloggers and their readers—are telling us is that there are new forms of participatory or citizen journalism that can engage those who had been outside today's news environments" (page 5). Brown, who currently directs the NEWS21 initiative, warns, "Without a new openness to new approaches, the news industry is in peril.... A turnaround is certainly possible, but only for those news organizations willing to invest time, thought, and resources into engaging their audiences, especially younger consumers (page 5).

Photojournalist Brent Stirton, who believes that water, poverty, and religion conspire to create many of the world's most abhorrent tragedies, says there is hope for the news media, but it will take determination. "Right now our world seems very caught up in the 24-hour news cycle, and it's just like a distraction. It's astonishing. We [have] essentially become pawns in that game. But impotence is a choice. Covering an issue like water is saying, 'OK, there really are bigger issues at stake here'" (personal communication, February 23, 2006).

FRAMING WATER: IDENTIFYING VALUES, PERCEPTIONS

Efforts to frame water issues for public discourse would benefit from the type of research marketing firms do to identify values and perceptions. A vital component of this method is creating a platform for leaders to put forth meaningful, enforceable policy. David Sandalow—a Brookings Institution scholar and assistant secretary of State for oceans, environment, and science in the Clinton Administration—sees the challenge of recasting water as an issue, especially for the media. But, he adds, with the right approach, "Water is an opportunity for right and left coalitions, even in today's political realm" (personal communication, November 18, 2004).

Diplomatic opportunities for water-related issues are unprecedented, Ambassador Harriett C. Babbitt (2006), co-chair of the Aspen Institute forum "Silent Tsunami: The Urgent Need for Clean Water and Sanitation," told an audience at the Aspen Institute Ideas Festival: "We know that we in the U.S. have lost great deal of moral authority around the world. But if we galvanize around an issue such as water, that's a very strong platform."

The other "body of power," the corporate realm—which in today's world wields comparable influence to the political sphere—is awakening to water issues. Companies such as Coca-Cola and General Electric (GE) have visible campaigns and interests in the issue. Influential membership organizations such as the Business Roundtable, United Nations Foundation, and Rotary International have chosen to pursue special initiatives on water.

Just as politicians are motivated by their own convictions, interest groups, and public opinion, corporations have their own codes of conduct, as well as economic incentives to enact certain policies. The growing trend of "corporate social responsibility" (CSR) will play heavily in water's future. Such efforts invest companies in water stewardship—they make businesses less wasteful and more efficient, and they can make products and services more appealing to customers. And they encourage openness, trust, and transparency.

Feeding hand-tended irrigation trenches, water flows plentifully from the ground, often from clear springs that are eventually captured by the Cutzamala system to sate Mexico City's thirst.

SEEDS OF CHANGE?

In the years since Zald's report and Shellenberger and Nordhaus' sharp critique, there are some signs of change, indications that the "story"—told through the media, NGOs, and corporate outlets—may be generating solutions to significant global challenges such as water. For example, in a New York hotel ballroom on a sunny September afternoon in 2005, 800 of the world's most successful businessmen and women, NGO executives, and political leaders convened to test a new idea of former president Bill Clinton.

The Clinton Global Initiative attracted a "who's who" of attendees, including Fortune 100 company chairmen, Nobel laureates, and world leaders, who pledged more than $2.5 billion in combined funds and resources to address poverty, climate change, religious conflict, and governance issues. The construct was simple: spend three days learning from one another and do not leave without making a significant commitment to solve a specific quandary.

This remarkable success was exceeded by the second round in September 2006, which garnered more than $7.3 billion in pledges. First Lady Laura Bush opened the session with the first commitment, a $16.4 million joint effort by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), and foundations to bring clean drinking water to communities in sub-Saharan Africa.

Predicted financial gains are also motivating new actors. *The New York Times* and others report growing investments in water technologies and infrastructure: "Most analysts expect the water market in the United States to be worth at least $150 billion by 2010" (Deutsch, 2006). And China alone expects to spend $125.5 billion on water and sanitation by 2010.

Bennett Freeman, former managing director for CSR at public relations giant Burson-Marsteller and a former deputy assistant secretary of State, sees the need to merge bottom-line opportunities with CSR and build coalitions of environmental NGOs, humanitarian groups, political leaders, corporations, and the public. Water, he says, is a particularly challenging and complex problem, and is difficult to label with a universal slogan. "But it's also an issue where companies can demonstrate they're 'walking the talk'" (personal communication, November 18, 2004).

GE is certainly walking the talk, reaping the rewards of its new "Ecomagination" campaign, which publicizes its efforts to benefit the environment through creative thinking and innovative products. The corporation's commitment, observes

Brokaw, former news anchor for GE-owned NBC, "is pretty substantial because it's good business" (personal communication, June 8, 2005). "Green is green," GE Chairman Jeffrey Immelt told the Clinton Global Initiative audience in 2005, referring to the economic benefits of "doing the right thing." GE understands, as Zald puts it, that "movements are made of conscience constituencies, which are all over the place. In today's world, you have to capture the imagination" (personal communication, June 24, 2005).

Ethos Water, a subsidiary of Starbucks, includes a call to action on each bottle of water it sells. "We saw an opportunity to create a brand with emotional appeal," recalls Jonathan Greenblatt, Ethos' co-founder. "If we could convert 5,000 Starbucks into classrooms…perhaps we could enable activism and build momentum. We have the chance to move the needle of awareness." Ethos Water bottles, he says, inform with a compelling story, leaving consumers with a positive feeling of participation (Greenblatt, 2006).

SUMMONING TRANSFORMATIVE IDEAS

Summoning the transformative power of ideas is a critical component of social change, and a compelling one. As Shellenberger and Nordhaus (2004) point out, "The world's most effective leaders are not issue-identified but rather vision and value-identified. These leaders distinguish themselves by inspiring hope against fear, love against injustice, and power against powerlessness. A positive, transformative vision doesn't just inspire, it also creates the cognitive space for assumptions to be challenged and new ideas to surface" (page 31). Such a vision accentuates the positive: "Imagine how history would have turned out had King given an 'I have a nightmare' speech instead."

Ambassador Babbitt (2006) also summons the transformative power of ideas to tackle water issues: "I hope that we have a perfect storm in the positive sense. The single most important element is political will."

EMPOWERING VISION WITH EFFORT

Even with the discussion of engineered movements, growing "green" markets for companies such as GE and Starbucks, and a more vigorous press, there exist no simple "bullet-point" answers that will solve the communications and public awareness dilemmas of the global freshwater crisis and other long-term, slow-onset problems. It will take unprecedented, dedicated efforts to make the issues personal and relevant, to connect humanity through the simple dramas of life, faith, and culture such as the simple gesture of a flower on Valentine's Day in a Mexico City barrio. And it will take committed journalists, such as Brent Stirton, who are using their visual and storytelling talents to bring the frontlines of the world's challenges to readers of the world's major magazines.

A movement for social change builds upon successful methods as it explores the potential for new ones. It embraces a diversity of views, pursues relevancy, excites interest, expands discussion, involves expertise, engages broad constituencies, and inspires possibilities. Is there an opportunity for such an approach in an atmosphere of divergent audiences and compressed communications? Or has the window of opportunity already closed, and the global freshwater crisis joined the other critical sustainability issues that are being diluted by their very ubiquity and the public's distraction?

"Just for once," Stirton says, "I'd really like to say to some mother or father who has just lost a child

to some ridiculous lack of resource, some ridiculous lack of medicine, a ridiculous lack of water, I'd just like to be able to say that there really is a plan out there, that things will change within their lifetime" (personal communication, February 23, 2006).

BIOGRAPHY

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