



Nate Downey '81



Gradual Greening

BY NATE DOWNEY '81

No one knows how many traffic jams backed up on the narrow causeways and hillside roads of northern Westchester County in the spring of 1981. When reservoirs resemble the surface of the moon instead of the water supply for eight or ten million neighbors to the south, you get rubbernecking with or without Eyewitness News parked halfway in a ditch. Figuring in the effects of the *Times*, *Journal*, *Post*, *News* and every manner of less-frequent local periodical, in a few months the Big Apple's famed water-delivery system went from being the envy of cities all over the world to a looming disaster.

By the middle of May, in order to prevent outright rationing, officials began to beg. "Avoid bathing," they'd implore. "Shower quickly and less often. Make wise use of the tap while brushing and shaving." Eventually, it was hip to pack dishwashers tighter than Studio 54 on a Saturday night.

Whether you were the type of Buckley boy to intimately embrace the *English Reference Book (ERB)* or you happened to be the kind who would enjoy the *ERB* as much as a zit outbreak, the most popular water-conservation edict on 74th Street came in the form of a pithy poem: "If it's yellow/ Let it mellow./ If it's brown./ Flush it down." *ERB* fans knew the couplets as a combination of spondees and anapests adorning an AA/BB rhyme scheme, but the boys who missed that chapter were no doubt equally amused. Normally, I would have a hard time in the giggle-control department after such a crack, but I guess it seemed to me then, as it does now, that water was no laughing matter.

As the drought grew ever more serious, I happily realized that it fell on me, the editor-in-chief of *The Shield* at the time, to jump into the media frenzy representing The Buckley School. Quite consciously working under the shadow of my more-talented predecessor, Robby Steel, motivated by summertime fishing experiences at the headwaters of one of the reservoir system's tinier tributaries, and inspired by our motto, "honor and truth," my attempt at providing a solution to the crisis imparted more *ardor* than *honor* and as much *fear* and *loathing* as *veritable truth*. Below, you'll find the last two paragraphs of the only editorial to appear in the June 1981 issue of our school newspaper.

It will not kill you to cut down on water consumption, but it may kill you if you don't. The health problems which could result from an inadequate water supply are staggering. Beginning today, let's all do our very best to save one of our most valuable resources, water. Help yourself and your neighbor by conserving water while there still is time.

As Americans, we are often accused of being wasteful. But in looking at the present situation, I can think of two reasons why anyone would not conserve. These reasons are ignorance and selfishness.

Fortunately, ninth graders are allowed to editorialize with know-everything attitudes that are as obvious as spaghetti sauce on a seersucker jacket. Nearly three decades later, although I'm

pretty much the same passionate environmentalist as I was back then, I've also learned to use the power of incentive and to respect the potential force of incrementalism. Recently, I developed a steady-and-slow, all-inclusive practical philosophy with which I hope to help redirect modern culture toward sustainability. It's called "gradual greening," and you can learn more about it below, in my upcoming book, *Harvest the Rain* (Sunstone Press), and at my blog at www.harvesttherain.com.

What is gradual greening?

Every plan to save civilization from itself needs to provide a vehicle for transporting people from point A, a place of ignorant bliss, to point B, a higher perch closer to true happiness. I start by asking for a personal commitment—to donate ten minutes of your time each day to doing something "sustainable." If you allow for one skipped day per week, this equals one hour of time donated for every seven days of your life. Assuming you take a yearly two-week vacation, your annual donation will equal about 50 hours per year. But the key is this: if you add *another* ten minutes to your daily routine every year and continue adding ten minutes every year thereafter, at the end of 30 years you will be building a more sustainable society for four hours per day—less than the amount of time that we, the American people, watch television.

In my book, I provide many "tips of the trade" for gradual greening. My diverse techniques, systems, methods and opportunities all revolve around water, but I also make clear that sustainable

activities are available to you with regard to every sector of the green economy from locally grown food, renewable energy and socially responsible investment to alternative transportation, green technology and ecological-materials sourcing.

As long as your sustainable vision is headed in the right direction, there are few rules. You set the clock, and you run the show. Gradual greening is a simple and new way to see the world and a way of becoming truly green. Gradual greening provides a wide variety of avenues of effectiveness from which people can choose, so that there is something for everybody at every stage of their personal development.

Even in my seemingly specialized world of precipitation collection, you don't have to be a gardener, plumber, architect or builder to start harvesting rain in your community. If you simply donate some time every month to a water-wise nonprofit organization, you have just joined the club. Personally, I lean toward local groups, but it could also mean getting involved in organizations with global appeal such as the Nature Conservancy and Conservation International.

Will there be time?

Some may say that gradual greening will take too long. Many will say that we have to dedicate much more of our time right now. The problem is, until many more people come to face the consequences of inaction, it will be left to each of us to make a difference as best we can. Often, a nearly magnetic attraction to modern conveniences will trump our ecological concerns. We tend to get stuck in our ways, as if controlled by a thermodynamic law of entropy on our souls, operating against our own best interest.

Aristotle warned 2,300 years ago that habits are difficult, almost impossible, to change. We may say we want change, but unless we are forced, we are by nature slow on the uptake. Writing a generation earlier, Plato, in his *Republic* redirects his classic conversation about the "perfect city" toward the critical question concerning "creature comforts." When Socrates discovers that his interlocutors are unwilling to give up the energy-intensive but enjoyable aspects of life, he reveals human nature's strong desire for the relishes of life that interfere with the successful pursuit of pure virtue.

Both of these ancient philosophers hit the mark. Under normal circumstances, human beings are not going to change quickly, and most will be entirely unwilling to give up cherished customs and luxuries overnight. In the big picture, change takes time, but each of us can change and gradually green ourselves, our homes, our communities and our world.

As far as the ten minutes a day goes, understand that this is just an average. We must start today with whatever time we can spare. The important point isn't how we divide up this small time commitment. It's that we *increase* our small commitment each year over the course of our lives. Sure, if we encourage others to do the same, so much the better, but I'm with Plato and Aristotle. To expect big, immediate change is naive.

What can I do?

Some will make sustainability a big part of their livelihoods. Others will have time for a sustainability-oriented hobby. Others won't have much time at all. But each of us has the potential to change, to evolve as a person, to recognize the value of our experience.

In the end it doesn't really matter what shade of green you become or what shape your sustainability-oriented endeavors take, nor does it matter when you do your greening. What matters is that you begin and then always remain steadfast in your daily and long-term commitment. Finally, keep in mind that anytime you learn or teach any form of ecology, you are putting in time as a "gradual greenie." You are more than a mere tree-hugger. You're a robust work-in-progress, a productive conservationist—not only conserving, but also *creating* resources that benefit yourself, your community and the planet.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you would like to learn more about the gradual-greening philosophy and how to apply it to your life, your real estate and/or your community. I was a boy who often complained that I "hated school," but over the years since graduating from Buckley, my gratitude for my experience has increased in a gradual, geometric progression. In particular, I have even come to understand that a paradigm-shifting look at sustainability seems to have had a big part of its start with my contributions to *The Shield*, and I am especially grateful for the soap-box experience I received. 🐉

