

BUFFALO RISING

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Who's Cleaning Up The Mess?



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When my kids were little, we used to have ‘cleaning day’ on Saturdays when my husband and I would each take a young one on our team and do certain tasks. We hoped to communicate through our shared work that all of us were responsible for taking care of our home – cleaning and putting things ‘away.’

As the kids grew, the lessons got more complex: not only do you clean up your mess, you are often responsible for cleaning up after others. I don’t think those lessons stuck because not many years later, I had a house of teenagers who left dirty dishes in the sink, clothes on the floor, and things anywhere. I put up a sign in the kitchen, “Your Mother Doesn’t Work Here Anymore!” I initiated a Dish Amnesty Day where you could bring, wash and put away those yucky plates and glasses from your room without comment from me.

We also were regular users of secondhand stores, bringing a box of things to pass on and filling a bag with new toys and books to bring home. This isn’t really ‘away’, but recycling, a creative way to constantly transform the things in our lives. This, I explained to children, who rolled their

eyes, is the way nature does it. There is no ‘away’ because all messes in the natural world are absorbed and transformed. Fallen trees, landslides, floods and even death have a place and a function on this earth — breaking down, composting, regenerating. I wish we humans understood that. We act as if there is a place, ‘away,’ especially in public housework.

For example, taking the trash out does keep the neighborhood clean, but really, it is not recycling and it is not away. Our waste goes to a place that probably had been a farm or woodland, but is now filled with discarded and often toxic things. Is this cleaning up our messes? In the last two centuries, we have created such extraordinary and lethal messes that we don’t even know how to clean them up.

Those of us who live in the Buffalo Niagara Region learned about this the hard way with Love Canal. Hooker Chemical and the U.S. Army disposed of lethal WWII waste in a canal next to the Niagara River and tons of toxic and hazardous brew are still right there, contained in a better designed and monitored canal that is already obsolete. Contained is not ‘away’ but a holding strategy until . . . until what?

Today my children are grown and their children will have to contend with the ultimate messes that have been made: carbon in the ocean and atmosphere that has causes climate change, and the nuclear waste we have left across the globe. These two messes come to ground just 30 miles south of Buffalo at the **West Valley Nuclear Waste Facility** where climate destabilization and severe storms greatly increase the risk of releasing nuclear waste into our waters. There is no way to clean up nuclear waste, no ‘away’ to send it to. Yet we know that it will be hazardous to human and environmental health for thousands of years so it must be addressed. What we can do is to dig it up so we know where it is, contain it securely, ensure that it is retrievable, and communicate across generations that this material is lethal.

In March 2018, the Department of Energy will hold hearings to determine what should be done with West Valley nuclear waste. We of all people, who know about the dangers of toxic waste, must insist that the risk to our children be minimized by a full cleanup and secure containment of this nuclear waste. Attend the hearings and help clean up the mess. www.SEISWestValleySite.com and www.niagarasierraclub.com

Lynda Schneekloth has nine grandchildren and is on the Board of the Sierra Club Niagara Group and the Western New York Environmental Alliance.