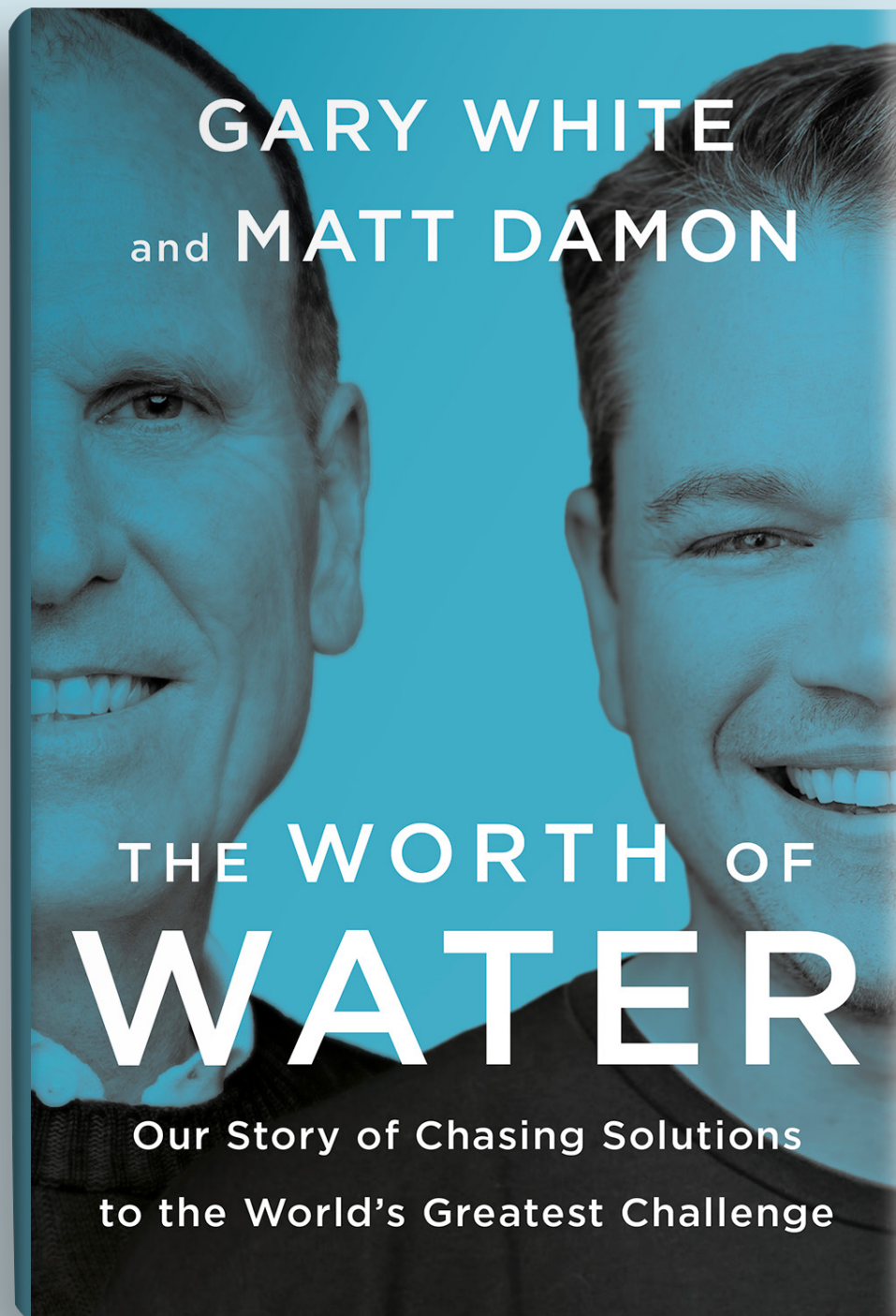


EXCERPT



Coming March 29, 2022





From the co-founders of non-profits Water.org & WaterEquity, this is the incredible story of how water expert and engineer **GARY WHITE** and actor **MATT DAMON** became unlikely allies in a decades-long mission to end the global water crisis for good.

## THE WATER CRISIS IS SOLVABLE.

Drawing on a decade of research and action, one clear solution emerges that would make the power of water available to all.



Because of this solution, Water.org has empowered more than **40 MILLION PEOPLE** with access to safe water or sanitation.



The Worth of Water invites us all to become a part of this effort—to match hope with resources, to empower families and communities, and to end the global water crisis for good. All the authors' proceeds from the sale of this book will be donated to Water.org.

# 1

---

**WHAT THE HELL  
IS THE “WATER  
ISSUE”?**

## **POV: Matt Damon**

I've spent most of my life telling stories on screen, not on the page—so as I was thinking about how to begin this book, my instinct was to imagine the opening shot. We fade in on a hut I visited in rural Zambia in 2006. I can still see it clearly in my mind: earthen brick walls, dirt floor, thatched roof. The landscape around it was usually dry, but because this was April, the end of the rainy season, the ground was covered, in parts, with a thin blanket of green. I was sitting outside the hut, waiting for a teenager to get home from school.

I was in Zambia because Bono—the rock star who spends his spare time fighting to end extreme poverty—had been pestering me to go. “Pest” is Bono’s word. He wears it like a badge of honor. He takes pride in getting people—politicians



especially, but others, too—to do things they wouldn't otherwise do, if he wasn't pestering them. The guy is really good at it. Bono believes that seeing poverty up close can change a person's priorities, can compel them to go out and do something about it. So he and his colleagues at the organization he started, DATA—which would eventually become the ONE Campaign—had been pressuring me to join them on a trip to Africa. He'd been pressuring me with the zeal of a telemarketer. He was not going to take no for an answer.

My answer wasn't no, exactly. I just had a lot going on in my life. My wife would be seven months pregnant at the time of the trip, and I had only a small window of time before my next movie. So I told Bono it just wasn't a good time. He looked at me and said, "It's *never* going to be a good time." Which, of course, was totally right.

I had no grand illusions about the point of going on this trip. It's not like I'd be changing anybody's life. Bono likes to say that there's nothing worse than a rock star with a cause, but an actor with a cause is a close second. I winced at the mental image of me walking through the bush or an urban slum somewhere, looking concerned, and then flying home to my comfortable life. But then I thought: that's an even dumber excuse for not going than "I'm busy." The more I thought about the trip, the more I realized that I wanted to go and meet some of the people who live in these extremely poor places, to see first-hand the challenges they face, and to figure out whether there was something I could be doing to help. So I told Bono I'd go, and my older brother Kyle agreed to come along, too.

## **What the Hell Is the “Water Issue”?**

The trip was about two weeks long. It took us to slums and rural villages across South Africa and Zambia. DATA had set it up like a college mini course. Each day, we learned about a different challenge that kept people from breaking the cycle of poverty: underfunded health systems, the challenges of life in a slum, the HIV/AIDS crisis. We read briefing books about each issue, visited organizations that were trying to tackle them, and, most important, talked with the people.

On one of our last days in Zambia, we were going to learn about water. It wasn't clear to me why. I understood why we had been focusing on HIV/AIDS and education—these were issues that you read about in the news, issues that people talked about or signed petitions about or donated in support of. But when I heard we'd be spending the day on the “water issue,” I wasn't sure what issue that was, exactly. I guessed the water was contaminated.

Then I read my issue brief. It said, yes, the water was contaminated—so much so that waterborne diseases were killing a child about every twenty seconds.<sup>1</sup> But the water was also hard to access. There were no water pipes in these villages, no water taps in people's homes. Somebody had to go get the water and bring it back, and that somebody was almost always a woman or a girl. This was their responsibility: to walk as far as necessary to whatever water source they could find and fill their plastic jerrican, a five-gallon water jug that weighs more than forty pounds when full.<sup>2</sup> Then they turn around and carry it home. And the next day they wake up and do it again.

To see what that was like, we drove four hours from

Zambia's capital, Lusaka, to a village with a well that a partner of DATA helped build. The staff knew of a family who lived close to the road. Their daughter was fourteen, and every day after school she walked to the well to get water for her family. She'd agreed to let us walk with her, but when we arrived at her home, it was empty. Not just the home, but the whole area. There was no village center that I could see; all the huts were spread out. It was very still, very quiet, and we just sat there for a while, waiting.

Eventually we saw the girl [TK] coming toward us down the path. She was carrying books and wearing a simple blue dress that looked like a school uniform. She greeted us shyly, then put down her books and went to fetch her family's jerrican.

At first, as we started walking to the well, the conversation was awkward. Which wasn't really a surprise. The girl, who walked alone to this well every day, suddenly had an entourage of trip coordinators and village officials, plus an overeager movie actor. She and I didn't speak the same language, so we had to rely on an interpreter. Still, as we walked, everybody else hung back a bit, giving us some space. The girl's responses to my questions were pretty short, but after a while we both relaxed a little, and even the silences felt natural enough. It was a peaceful walk down a country road.

After half an hour or so, we arrived at the well. Somebody suggested I try my hand at it. I had just finished filming one of the Jason Bourne movies, so I thought I was in pretty good shape. But pumping water from this well was harder than it looked. The girl and I laughed as I struggled with it. She had

this incredibly practiced way of working the pump and then hefting this big, heavy, yellow can up onto her head, where she kept it balanced with the help of one hand. This was easy to admire until you remembered (if you’d let yourself forget) that this was work for her: an inescapable, essential chore.

On our way back, it started to rain. Nobody said anything about it; we just kept walking. There’s something about succumbing to the rain and accepting you’re going to get soaked that loosens people up. The conversation got easier. I asked the girl if she wanted to live in the same village when she grew up. She smiled at me, a little shy again—as if she was debating whether or not to answer. After a moment, she did. “I want to go to Lusaka,” she said, “and become a nurse.”

I had this feeling that she mostly kept this ambition to herself. I wondered if her parents even knew, and if she’d hesitated to tell me because I might tell them. It was no small thing for her to have this dream—to think about leaving the place she’d always known, to head out on her own and show what she could do. It really resonated with me. And look, I know it’s a cliché to meet someone halfway across the world whose life is dramatically different from your own, and suddenly see yourself in them—but I did. She brought to mind that feeling of restlessness, that eagerness to get out and do something new, somewhere new. I spent my teenage years pooling the money from my summer jobs in a joint bank account with Ben Affleck so we could move to New York and become actors. Not the same thing, obviously. But not so different that we couldn’t connect.



As I talked with her, it seemed clear to me that she was going to do it. She had a spark, a kind of self-possession that made it easy for me to imagine that one day, she'd work up the courage to tell her parents she was going to chase her dream to Lusaka. Maybe they'd be angry about that, or sad about losing her, or proud that she was thinking big. Maybe all three. But she'd study, and she'd work, and she'd meet her goal. More than twelve years later I'm still convinced she's made it. That she's not still walking that path and carrying that jerrican. I hope I'm right.

The main reason I'm optimistic—actually, the only reason I can be optimistic—is that this girl was able to go to school. It took half an hour to walk to the well we visited, but an hour of walking every day left her enough time to attend school and do her homework before the sun set—the village had no electricity, so after dark it was impossible to read a book. DATA introduced me to her because she was, in relative terms, a success story—a girl lucky enough to have a well close by so she could spend a good part of her days learning. Millions of girls aren't so lucky. For them, getting water doesn't take one hour; it takes three or four or six. It's what they do: they walk for water. That necessity keeps them from going to school, or working in the fields to earn money for their families, or creating something they can sell at a market. In fact, in some regions of India, water is so scarce that men take “water wives”—second and even third wives who spend all day, every day, gathering water for the family.<sup>3</sup>

I kept coming back to that old adage: “Water is life.” How

many hours of that fourteen-year-old’s life had already been saved because someone thought to dig a well a mile away from her house instead of four or five? That decision was the reason this girl could spend her days doing more than walking to and from the well. It was the reason she was able to pursue a dream that felt so big and audacious she hesitated even to say it out loud. For that girl, water was life; it was also a shot at a better life.



I should probably pause right here to acknowledge that the “celebrity goes to Africa and resolves to change the world” thing has probably triggered your gag reflex. It triggers mine, too. I might, in fact, be that celebrity, but I am also my mother’s son.

My mom, Nancy Carlsson-Paige, who’s in her seventies now, was a professor of early childhood education when I was growing up. She taught at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. From the time I was nine years old, I lived with my mom and brother in a six-family communal house near the school. You know when people complain about the liberal bias of academia, and they paint some ludicrous picture of a kind of super-bookish hippie commune? Yeah, I grew up there. No joke, one of my babysitters was Howard Zinn, the famous Boston University professor who wrote *A People’s History of the United States* and helped lead the movement to teach history from the perspective of oppressed people rather than the people who did the oppressing. When people call me a Hollywood

liberal, part of me wants to fight back—and part of me just wants to say, “Well, Cambridge, not Hollywood.”

During my teenage years in the eighties, one of the big issues you heard a lot about in Cambridge (not at the places where Ben and I were hanging out in Central Square, but definitely around my dinner table) was the upheaval in Central America. The roots of the crisis went back to the 1950s, when the Eisenhower administration ordered the CIA to help overthrow the democratically elected president of Guatemala on the notion that it would stop the spread of communism in our hemisphere. Guatemala’s president was just a left-wing social reformer, not a Communist, but the fear he might secretly be one, or might someday become one, was enough for the United States to support a military coup. Two hundred thousand people died in the civil war that followed.<sup>4</sup> In the seventies and eighties, leftist movements in the region—the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador—overthrew a dictatorship and a military junta, respectively. The United States backed the dictators, giving them the training and funding to conduct long and bloody civil wars. There were terrible human rights violations on both sides, but there’s too much tragic history to cover in this book—anyhow, I know some people aren’t going to trust a guy who first learned history from Howard Zinn to tell it.

Suffice it to say that when I was growing up, Cambridge was a major center of resistance to these policies. You’d see churches hosting memorials for victims of political oppression; you’d run into community volunteers walking door to door carrying

pictures of war victims, raising money for them. I remember big protests in Boston Common—including one where five hundred people occupied the JFK Federal Building. My mom went to these protests. She was arrested at one of them. And while they didn’t exactly reverse US policy, they did make a difference. Our governor defied the Reagan administration by refusing to send the Massachusetts National Guard to conduct military exercises in Central America. Cambridge declared itself a sanctuary city for refugees from the conflict, and chose as our sister city a Salvadoran village that had been devastated by violence; we sent medical supplies and other kinds of support.<sup>5</sup>

Around this time, my mom started learning Spanish and traveling to Central America whenever she could. She went to Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras. She went for a range of reasons: mainly to get a better sense of what was happening there and to bring the news back home to help strengthen the case against further US intervention. A lot of activists believed that if American citizens were on the ground in these countries, our government wouldn’t risk their lives by invading.

She brought me along on three of the tamer trips. To start with, we’d live with local families and take language classes, and then we’d spend the rest of the trip backpacking around the country, riding on buses filled with chickens. The summer we went to Guatemala, there was still fighting going on up in the mountains. Once, a truck passed me with a bunch of kids in the back. They had camo paint on their faces and guns in their hands. They were on their way to join the battle in the hills. I was seventeen at the time, and they looked like they

were around my age or even younger. I'll never forget making eye contact with one of them and seeing his blank stare. That kid had seen a lot of things I hadn't and never would.

The next summer—it was 1989 and I'd just finished my first year of college—my mom said: “Matt, I've been restraining myself on these trips because you and Kyle need a mom. But you're both grown now, and you should know I'm not going to do that anymore.” She started going to more dangerous places—including Cambridge's sister city in El Salvador. The town had been suspected of harboring guerrillas, and while she was there, the Salvadoran army came in, fired their guns in the air, and urinated in the town well to contaminate the water. Thankfully my mom was unhurt. She came home even more intent on engaging with the world—on working to figure out what was going on, and how she could take a more active role in righting injustices.

But her views on all this were complicated. As determined as she was to make a difference, she was also deeply skeptical of people, governments, aid organizations—anyone, really—rushing into struggling communities in the name of help. I remember her telling me that intervention—however well-meaning it might be—can come from a place of condescension, can even reflect a kind of unconscious racism, an assumption that black and brown people just aren't capable of helping themselves. She couldn't stand the arrogance of relief workers who thought they had it all figured out, who just needed to bestow their wisdom and largesse on people in need. (Seriously, don't get her started on this.)



My mom turned this scrutiny on herself, too. She knew her heart was in the right place, but she also knew that wasn't enough. Her travels showed her how hard it was to truly understand the complexities of life in a country where you've never lived, to appreciate a set of circumstances so different from any you've ever faced, or to anticipate the consequences of any ideas you bring from the outside. The caricature of the crusading liberal is pretty familiar. But it was clear to me that my mom wasn't crusading. She was wrestling—with herself and her own hesitations. She was working hard to avoid the traps she saw all around her. She was trying to be humble, never presumptuous, trying to make sure she never imagined, even subconsciously, that she knew more about the circumstances of these Salvadorans or Mexicans or Guatemalans than they did themselves. And so, armed with self-awareness, at least, she got back on a plane to see what she could do.

But a lot of time—years, actually—passed between having those conversations with my mom and applying those lessons myself. They were years in which, for a while, I was living out of a duffel bag, going from friends' couches to acting jobs and back to friends' couches—years in which engaging with the world, to be honest, took a backseat to getting bigger and better roles and steady work. Then, when that began to happen, it took all my energies to make sure it kept on happening; then Lucy and I were starting a family, and so on; and before I knew it, it was 2006, and Bono was pestering me to get involved. He had shown that advocating for others didn't mean you had to stop living your own life. He and U2 didn't stop

recording albums during all those years he'd been advocating for the world's poor. He didn't quit his day job or give any less of himself to his wife, Ali, and their four kids.

And he didn't hang back out of concern that people were going to roll their eyes every time a rich rock star started talking about poverty, or that they were going to call him a hypocrite or a dilettante or a photo-op philanthropist. People did call him all these things, and still do; it comes with the territory. But Bono takes the position that a little eye-rolling and some snark on social media is a small price to pay for doing *something* as opposed to, you know, doing nothing, or simply writing checks. Don't get me wrong: giving to charities is important, and if you've been lucky, as I've been, you can give something proportionate to the good fortune you've received. I've always been a big believer in that. But at the same time I had the feeling there was more I could be doing. That trip in 2006 was my first real step toward figuring out what that might be.



It wasn't immediately obvious to me that I should focus on water. The trip had been a blur. DATA had thrown so much at me so quickly that I was reeling; I had to spend some time sorting through it all and deciding where I might make a difference.

My first instinct was to focus on what seemed to be causing the most immediate suffering: HIV/AIDS. Early in the trip, we spent a day in Soweto, South Africa's largest township, to learn more about the HIV crisis. We went to meet two young

boys—one around twelve years old, the other around seven—whose parents had died of AIDS. The boys were living on their own now, just the two of them. The older boy told me how he had to function as both parents to his little brother. One of the things that struck me was how spotless their room was. No one was there to clean it for them. No one was there to tell them to clean it. They just did it on their own.

I walked out and said: “What are these kids going to do? What’s going to happen to them?” And our guides explained, matter-of-factly, that the boys would probably end up in gangs. They said that gangs in the city had all sorts of techniques to pull in desperate young boys who needed money. They usually succeeded.

I couldn’t stop thinking about that moment for the rest of the trip. I wanted to do something to help combat the AIDS crisis, and there were clear opportunities to get involved—fighting AIDS was very much the focus of DATA. But the more I learned, the less confident I was that the war on AIDS needed me as a foot soldier. Thanks to activists around the world and leaders like Bono, Bill Gates, and former presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, governments had belatedly gotten serious about stopping the spread of AIDS. Of course a lot more funding and support was needed. But other problems were causing a lot of pain, too, and getting just a fraction of the attention.

Education was an issue I connected with personally, given my upbringing, and I knew that the value of education was easy to communicate, since so many people, irrespective of background, have experienced it firsthand. But again, there was no

shortage of people working on this issue. Then I thought I should channel my mom's example, and think about what the people I met on the trip asked me to work on. But that had happened to me just once. We were eating dinner at the home of the chief of a village outside Lusaka. All of a sudden, he leaned forward and asked: "When can we do something about the crocodiles?"

Turns out that in his village, crocodiles were killing more people than AIDS was. Needless to say, this wasn't in my briefing book. I asked one of the folks at DATA if there was something we could do, and she said she'd look into it. I guess the solution was pretty simple. It wasn't going to take a UN commission to figure it out: traps, guns, that sort of thing. Still, I couldn't imagine myself as the champion of the cause. *Matt Damon, Crocodile Hunter.*

My mind kept going back to that girl in blue and our walk to the well. And the more I thought about her situation, and about everything else I learned about water, the more I saw how central water is to everything. Life's impossible without it. And when clean water is unavailable, human progress is impossible.

Every other issue I encountered on the trip, or read about in the news, seemed to trace back to water. Health, for example. Diarrhea, the most common symptom of waterborne diseases, kills more children than malaria, measles, and HIV/AIDS—combined.<sup>6</sup> For millions more children, waterborne diseases cause such severe malnourishment that their physical and mental growth is stunted forever.<sup>7</sup> And there are even further health consequences for the women and girls who transport the water. As Åsa Regnér, the deputy executive director of UN Women,

has put it: “All this fetching and carrying, usually from a young age, causes cumulative wear-and-tear to the neck, spine, back and knees. In effect, a woman’s body becomes part of the water-delivery infrastructure, doing the work of pipes.”<sup>8</sup>

Water is central to the fight to get more kids in school, too. Illnesses caused by waterborne diseases cause 443 million missed school days each year.<sup>9</sup> The lack of bathrooms and sanitary products keep girls at home for multiple days each month when they have their menstrual cycles. And of course, the long walks to water cause girls to drop out completely. If you want kids in the classroom, you have to end the water crisis.

And if you’re concerned about gender equity—what more significant step could we take to empower women and girls than simply to give them back their days?

The water crisis is also a big driver of extreme poverty, costing economies around the world \$260 billion every year.<sup>10</sup> And, as we’re already seeing, water shortages are one of the most devastating consequences of a warming climate. For people who are connected to water infrastructure, shortages will be expensive. For people who aren’t, shortages will be deadly.

“Water is the first principle of everything.”<sup>11</sup> Thales, the ancient Greek philosopher, said that. It looked to me like Thales was right. Every other conversation I was having about development issues—health, education, women’s rights, economic opportunity, the environment—could have started, maybe should have started, with a discussion of water. Or, to be exact, a discussion of WASH—the usual shorthand for water, sanitation, and hygiene, which are often treated as a single issue. But hardly



anyone was talking about it. I kept coming back to something one of Bono's colleagues had told me. "Water is the least sexy of all causes," he said. *Yeah*, I thought. *Now try adding shit to it!*

Why are water and sanitation so unsexy—why do they get such little attention? Over the years I've developed and discarded a bunch of theories. The one I've hung on to is best captured by a parable David Foster Wallace once told:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says "Morning, boys. How's the water?" And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes "What the hell is water?"<sup>12</sup>

Wallace used the story to illustrate that, in his words, "the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about." But for me it's not just a metaphor. When it comes to water, it's almost literally true.

We are surrounded by water. We wake up and shower with water, brush our teeth with water, flush our toilet with water, make coffee with water, drink a glass of water, wash our dishes with water, all before we even leave the house. We never imagine we might have to go without it—because we never do. We rarely think about paying for it because it's so cheap it's virtually free, unless it's in a plastic bottle advertising its electrolytes. The one drink you get for free at any Starbucks, or any restaurant, is a glass of water. We're used to drinking for free from fountains, or using free bathrooms.

So you and me—we’re the fish. “What the hell is water?”

Water and sanitation are so available to us that we don’t notice them; we don’t even see them. And except on rare occasions, like the devastating failure of the water system in Flint, Michigan, we’re never without them. We know what it’s like to skip a meal from time to time; we’ve seen an empty fridge. So we know what it might conceivably feel like to be hungry. But how many of us have ever turned on every faucet in our house, every tap in our whole town, and saw nothing come out? How many of us have even imagined that?

About twenty years ago, I read a story in the *LA Times* about two college roommates who’d gone on a road trip. They got out at Carlsbad Caverns, went out for a hike, and got lost. They were wandering around for four days with no water. The thirst was so agonizing that one of them begged his friend to kill him rather than let him die from dehydration. The friend had a small knife with him. And he actually did it—actually killed his best friend—only to learn, not long after, that they were just 240 feet off the trail.<sup>13</sup>

They did an autopsy on the kid, and it showed something surprising. He hadn’t been dying of thirst. He hadn’t been close to dying of thirst. He just hadn’t realized what he was experiencing—because *he’d never been truly thirsty before*.

In 1906 a scientist named W. J. McGee interviewed a man who had survived for almost a week without water in the Arizona desert. McGee described thirst as having three stages. The first is normal dryness, which we all know. The second stage is where your throat burns, your skin tightens, and

eventually you start going insane. The last stage is what McGee called “a progressive mummification” of the body.<sup>14</sup> The kid was somewhere in stage two.

I was so gripped and horrified by this story that the morning I read it, when the director Gus Van Sant called me about something else, I told him about it, and we ended up doing a movie based on it—a movie called *Gerry*. Okay, maybe not the most uplifting film I’ve ever made. Not really a date night thing. But I found it fascinating how fully we, in wealthy countries like ours, had lost touch with some of the most basic human experiences, like profound, sustained, even dangerous thirst.

Which is why, I think, it takes time for this issue to register with people. Sometimes I get frustrated when people don’t just get it. Then I remember that I didn’t, either. Even after I met that determined girl, who made such a vivid impression on me, the concept of chronic thirst and a lack of access to water was so foreign to me that it still it took me a while to grasp how much it was defining her life.

But in time I felt like I did get it—I understood the problem, if not its solutions. And I had a sense that this crisis would get the attention it needed once we got more people to hear stories like this girl’s. And what is celebrity if not a totally needless surplus of attention? If I could redirect some of it toward a cause that needed it, I’d feel like I’d started, at least, to make some kind of difference.

And look—I’m not claiming I’m the best spokesperson for this issue. Let’s just come out and say it: you’re reading a book by two privileged white guys—about an issue that primarily

affects marginalized black and brown people, and women especially. I’m speaking out because the only remedy I know to the problem that not enough people care about water is to keep talking about it myself.

But I know that getting involved in an issue that affects communities you are not a part of requires constant listening and learning. It requires awareness of your own assumptions and biases, deep humility about all the ways good work can go wrong, and a commitment to keep looking for ways to do it better. In other words, it takes that combination of thoughtfulness and fearlessness that my mom taught me all those years ago. I hope you’ll hold me accountable to her example.



Not long before the Africa trip I happened to get involved in a documentary about three guys who’d decided to run across four thousand miles of the scorching sand of the Sahara Desert—all the way from the west, where the Atlantic Ocean meets Senegal, to the east, where Egypt meets the Red Sea.<sup>15</sup> I got talked into it by one of the runners, a charismatic guy named Charlie Engle. A few decades ago, Charlie woke up on a motel floor after a cocaine binge, almost dead. He got up, cleaned up, and started running. He never stopped. He took all his addictive tendencies and applied them to running; he became an ultramarathoner.

When I met Charlie, the two of us went on a ten-mile run, and he asked me if I’d ever run a marathon. I said I hadn’t. “My brother runs marathons,” I told him, “and I trained for

one, but my Achilles tendons start to break down after about twelve miles.”

“No they don’t,” he said.

As the owner of the tendons we were talking about, I disagreed. I said they did.

“They don’t,” he said again. Then this gem: “You need to reorient your relationship to pain.”

If Charlie sounds like a barely credible movie character—he did to me, too. But I liked him, and I liked his project. I signed on as an executive producer and said I would narrate the film. I agreed to do it because I thought it was an interesting story—human beings against the elements, that sort of thing. But by the time the runners were ready to cross the continent and our crew went to Africa to film them, I saw it a little differently. By then I had been to parts of Africa with DATA, and when I looked at the route these runners were going to travel—through Senegal, Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Libya, and Egypt—the map looked to me like Ground Zero in the global water crisis. Here were countries facing extreme water shortages—and lacking the infrastructure to address the problem. If you wanted to understand or to do something about the water crisis, this was a good place to start.

While preparing to shoot the film, I learned that there were organizations doing great work to get the people of the region access to water and sanitation. These groups were short on funding, though, and it occurred to me that this was something I could do: raise money. So I talked with the others who were



leading the project, and we decided to create a charitable arm for the expedition: the H<sub>2</sub>O Africa Foundation.

We knew it was going to take a lot of work to identify the best water and sanitation organizations, learn about their work, vet them to see if they’d make good partners, and fund them. Fortunately, because of the film, we were going to have people on the ground, moving across the area. I don’t mean the runners. They had enough to worry about, like surviving. I mean the people who were following the runners in cars and trucks, helping in various ways and recording the journey. Along the way, they’d have a chance to speak with locals about their water challenges, and keep an eye out for organizations that were helping.

To understand how incredible an opportunity that was, know that just getting into some of these countries is tricky. Even as the runners were in Niger, making their way across the desert there, Libya—which shares a border to the northeast—hadn’t approved their application to enter the country. I was shooting *The Bourne Ultimatum* at the time, and I ended up flying from the set in [TK] to Washington, DC, to try to convince some officials at the Libyan Embassy to let the runners in. Clearly, I’m not as charming as I like to think, because their answer was no. It took a Libyan-born businessman pulling some strings to get the application approved.<sup>16</sup>

So it was a big win just to have people in these countries in the first place, and I wanted to make the most of the opportunity. Of course, I knew that doing this research on the side, while shooting a movie, was a highly imperfect approach. When

you get a degree in, say, development studies at, say, the London School of Economics, this is not what they teach you. But I wasn't getting a degree in development studies. I was making a documentary, and I was eager to kickstart my own learning process. I kept coming back to a line on a magnet that my mom kept on our fridge when I was growing up. It was a quote widely attributed to Gandhi: "Whatever you do may seem insignificant to you, but it is most important that you do it."

And I'm glad we did. The team identified some amazing organizations doing indispensable work—and they were reminded every day of how much more work needed to be done. Once, while the crew was driving along in a truck loaded with water and food for the runners, they came across a seven-year-old boy sitting alone, obviously scared, in the desert. He had a little camel milk with him, and a little dried meat, but that was all. His parents had left him there while they went to collect water—a journey that, in the heart of the Sahara, took two full days, and required two people. The family owned a herd of sheep, goats, and a camel—and their only option was to leave the boy alone, tending to the animals. The crew asked him if this happened often. He said it did. They gave him a box of cookies, a bag of fresh dates, and a few big bottles of water, but they knew that none of this was a lasting solution—that as their truck drove away, sending up clouds of sand, they would quickly seem, to the boy, like a surreal sort of dream.<sup>17</sup>

The runners and the crew kept hearing a phrase in the local language, Tamachek: *Aman iman*.

"Water is life."<sup>18</sup>



H<sub>2</sub>O Africa raised a pretty good sum through the movie and its promotion; then money from other sources started coming in. OneXOne, a Canadian charity that invests in organizations that promote children’s well-being, donated a million dollars to H<sub>2</sub>O Africa when I hosted a gala for them in Toronto. Then we got a major grant from the PepsiCo Foundation, which invests heavily in partnerships to help end the water crisis. It felt like a major vote of confidence in what we were doing.

The more success we had in raising money—and redirecting it to organizations on the ground in Africa—the more aware I became of the gaps in my knowledge, in my experience. Success in fundraising carries a responsibility to be a good steward of the resources that people entrust to you—which meant that I had a lot more learning to do. I’d been happy to get started without having total command of the facts. But I wasn’t okay continuing that way.

I started reading more about the crisis and meeting with experts. I’d long admired the economist Jeffrey Sachs, who is a major player in development circles and, I had heard, a big influence on Bono’s thinking. (Bono calls himself a “Jeff Sachs groupie.”) I first met Jeff at the gala in Toronto, and he became an incredible mentor to me, always willing to meet for long lunches and help me start to understand—if not fluently speak—the language of development. Here, by the way, is a

warning. If and when you try to learn about a great global challenge like water, be aware that many of the sentences you encounter are going to read like this: “Managing water resources involves a dialectic between integration (Dublin Principle 1) and subsidiarity (Dublin Principle 2).”<sup>19</sup>

When this happens, back away slowly from the website. Just don’t give up. Seriously, almost every major player in the development world speaks in jargon like this. A lot of it, I think, is just the shorthand that develops among experts. Hollywood has its own version: “tent poles,” “beat sheets,” “slug lines.” Whatever industry you’re part of, impenetrable language is a kind of gatekeeping. If nothing else, it communicates: “We know a lot about this, and you don’t.” Which of course is completely true—the experts are always going to know way more than you; that’s why they’re experts and you, with all due respect, are not. I’m not, either.

And I’m okay with that. I’m more than willing to feel less than smart, to ask questions that expose me as clueless or at least a little naïve. Turns out I’m better at this than I expected. But there does come a point—and for H<sub>2</sub>O Africa, it came a couple of years after we started—when it’s no longer enough to be a willing student. What I came to realize was that I didn’t need a teacher; I needed a partner—someone who knew more about water than I ever would but might be willing to join forces and do more as a team than either of us could do on our own. I still didn’t know much, but I had learned enough to know there was one guy who seemed to know water better than anyone else. And that was Gary White.

2

---

**THE WATER  
DECADE**



## **POV: Gary White**

Let me start by saying that I'm not the kind of guy you'd expect to walk out on one of his first desk jobs. It's probably important for me to make that clear—before I tell you about the time I did exactly that.

When *Esquire* ran one of the early profiles of Water.org in 2009, the reporter who accompanied us on a field visit to India explained the difference between Matt and me by describing our outfits—which at first glance seemed exactly the same. We were both wearing button-down shirts and khakis, except Matt's shirt was loose and untucked, its top few buttons undone. Mine was tucked in and cinched by a belt. I had a ball-point pen in my shirt pocket. "The effect," the reporter wrote, "is night and day, black and white, movie star and engineer."<sup>1</sup>

He wasn't wrong. I often come across as a buttoned-up engineer, even when I'm not standing next to Matt Damon for contrast.

Suffice it to say that I'm not the type for dramatic gestures. That's what made that day in the winter of 1989 so strange. I'd just moved to Denver to take a job at an engineering consulting firm. My job was to design a pipeline that would carry water from one place in Pueblo, Colorado, to another place in Pueblo, Colorado. It wasn't glamorous work, but it was important, in its way.

So in the middle of my second week on the job, when I stood up at my desk and walked out of the office and down the street, it wasn't an act of protest. It didn't even feel like a conscious choice. I was just restless. Not in a get-up-and-stretch-your-legs sort of way. I mean restless in an existential sense. I just needed to walk, to get some space to think.

A few months earlier, I'd been wandering around the Guatemalan Highlands as an engineering specialist for Catholic Relief Services. My job was to oversee projects that CRS was supporting across Latin America and the Caribbean. But that didn't count toward the professional engineering license I was pursuing. For that, I needed another year of officially approved engineering experience. Hence the job in Denver.

Most of the projects I'd been supervising at CRS were water projects. In the villages I'd visited, I met women whose entire lives, every minute of every day, were shaped by the fact that they didn't have access to water and sanitation—from the moment they woke up (often at 4:00 a.m. so they could go to the

bathroom in the fields while it was still dark, and therefore a little more private), to the daytime hours they spent collecting water, to the nights when they went to bed covered in grime because they had only enough water to wash their children.

Compare that with my new job. Most of the people in Pueblo, Colorado, never thought about water at all, and it was my job to make sure they didn't have to—to ensure that at the touch of a handle, the toilet flushed away the waste, and the faucets and showers and hoses ran clean. It was a worthy thing to be doing. But it felt to me like doing yardwork while your neighbor's house was on fire.

Without realizing it, I'd walked for miles. I hadn't been paying attention to where I was going, but somehow I'd ended up at my church. I went inside to sit down for a while. The building was deserted. I found a spot in a pew and debated whether or not to quit my job.

This church was relatively new to me since I'd just moved to town, but it reminded me of home. Growing up in Kansas City, I lived a block from St. Bernadette's, our local Catholic church, and went to Mass every Sunday. I also went to a Catholic high school run by the Christian Brothers order, even though the cost of the tuition made it a luxury for us. My parents couldn't afford it for my three older siblings, but they told me if I found a way to pay half my tuition, they would cover the rest. During the summer, to help pay my share, I worked as a janitor at the St. Bernadette's grade school, mopping the same floors and cleaning the same toilets I thought I'd left behind when I graduated.

In school and in church, I was taught: “Unless a life is lived for others, it’s not worth living.” My parents—particularly my mom, Kathy White—took that teaching to heart. She’d grown up on a Missouri farm and migrated to the big city in the late 1940s, so she never had the same chance I would get to serve others halfway around the world. But she still led a life of service. When she wasn’t at home dedicating her life to her five kids, she was a block up the hill at the church, donating her time. She helped to resettle Vietnamese refugees and raised funds to support people in poverty in Kansas City. Our church, like most churches, had rummage sales to raise money to donate, and my mom would be there every day, sorting through piles of clothing and old toys.

So service had always been important to me. But sitting in that church in Denver, I thought about the phrase that Catholics often use, a phrase that happened to be the title of a class I had taken in high school: “Social Justice.” Of course social justice can mean many things, but for me it brought to mind a moment from the first volunteer trip I’d taken abroad, back in college. I was in the slums of Guatemala City, where I saw a little girl, maybe five or six years old, filling a bucket from a filthy barrel of water. Her bucket must have weighed almost as much as she did. She heaved it up, put it on her head, and teetered home along a stream of sewage. I wanted to free her from that heavy load, as anyone would; I wanted to find a way to communicate that this water could make her very sick or even kill her. But I couldn’t. My Spanish at that point was too

poor to explain the risk. And in any case, this was the only water she was going to get, because she had been born into poverty in the wrong place.

It wasn't just sad. It wasn't just tragic. It was an injustice—a word I knew not to use lightly. In that moment in Guatemala City, I understood something that before I had only studied, had only known in the abstract: that for billions of people like this little girl, every day is a struggle to meet their most basic needs. For them, making sure that their families have water to drink and food to eat and a safe place to sleep takes so much of their energy that they have nothing left to invest in their own future. So generations of people, through no fault of their own, stay trapped in this desperate loop. My upbringing taught me that the world didn't have to be this way—*that we could choose for it not to be this way*—but we don't, so it is.

I needed to quit.

If this were a novel, I would never have walked back to that desk again. But as I said, I'm not a dramatic guy. I called in sick for the rest of the day—and the next. And I was sick, emotionally speaking. (I was also painfully sunburned after wandering around all day in the sun.) I made a plan with my wife, Becky: I'd stay at the Denver job long enough to take the professional engineer exam—and not a day longer, even if I failed it. I'd also apply to grad school so I could keep learning about water and exploring new ways I could help address the crisis.

I followed the plan. I was accepted into a master's program in environmental engineering at UNC Chapel Hill, home of

some of the world's leading water experts. And not long after my one-year anniversary at the consulting firm, I gave my employer two weeks' notice.



I decided to organize a water-focused fundraiser at St. Bernadette's. I called it the Thanksgiving Water Dinner because that was when it took place: late November 1990. We raised money for Cocepradil, a fantastic organization in Honduras that works with communities to build spring-fed water systems. Our goal was to raise enough to help Cocepradil bring clean water to a community called El Limon. Like most Thanksgiving celebrations, this was a family affair: everyone in my extended family helped set up the dinner. My mom cornered everyone she knew after Mass, recruiting them to come to the dinner. She was our first and most effective volunteer. Thanks largely to her, a hundred of our friends and family turned up—way more than I'd expected. Meissen's Catering, a local business run by a friend of the family, donated the meals, and I put on a slideshow of water projects from my time at Catholic Relief Services. I was lucky that Father Pat Tobin, a wonderful Kansas City priest whom Mother Teresa had asked to lead retreats for her Sisters of Charity in India, offered to speak. That night, we raised over \$4,000. Becky made a banner for everyone at the dinner to sign. The next year, when I visited El Limon to see how the project was progressing, I presented it to the community.

The dinner was such a success that we decided to host it again in Kansas City the next year, and to host one in Chapel Hill, as well. Some of my engineering classmates stepped up to form a committee—especially my good friend Marla Smith, who stood out as the most committed volunteer. The two of us registered a new organization: the International Partnership for Safe Water, or IPSW. (We're engineers. Branding isn't our strong suit.) A few of our engineering professors formed IPSW's first board.

I was excited about the road ahead. But I was also aware that starting an organization to address the global water crisis in the early 1990s was like showing up at a party just as everyone is packing up and heading home.

Many people have forgotten this by now, or are too young to know or remember, but the 1980s were a time of great hope in the water and sanitation world. The period had been designated by the United Nations as the International Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Decade. (UN officials aren't great at branding, either.) The UN made that choice after hosting countless conferences on development issues in the sixties and seventies and discovering that no matter the theme—overpopulation or urbanization or the environment—the conversation always seemed to come back to water. Lack of water was one of the greatest challenges facing developing nations: only 40 percent of people had access to safe drinking water, and only 25 percent had access to even the most basic forms of sanitation.<sup>2</sup> Every year, lack of safe drinking water killed an estimated 15 million children.<sup>3</sup>



As developing nations called attention to the crises they were facing, development experts began to see that healthy societies need clean, accessible water as urgently as our own bodies do. So, in 1980, the UN General Assembly set a goal that by the end of the decade, everyone everywhere would have access to safe water and sanitation.

I'd started working at Catholic Relief Services in the middle of the Water Decade, and I felt excited to be a part of the effort. I was brand new to this work, so it was no surprise that I was feeling idealistic, but even the experts seemed to be saying the world could solve the water crisis—if not by 1990, which most people saw as a highly ambitious target, then maybe by the following decade.

Honestly, back then I had a pretty idealized vision of what it would take to end the crisis—and what my role in that would be. I remember thinking that to be as efficient as possible, I'd get my pilot's license and fly myself to places that needed engineering help to get clean water.

It wasn't long before I was set straight. As I visited villages across Latin America in dire need of clean water, I started to see something that, at first, made no sense at all: state-of-the-art wells, recently built, already broken down and abandoned.



The core of the problem was that most of these water and sanitation projects weren't being built *with* the local community. They were being built *for* the local community.

In those days, many of the US government programs brought in American firms to design them and American firms to supply the materials. At USAID, this was actually mandated. During the Water Decade, US law required that USAID use American contractors for most development work—the logic being that if we’re going to help all these people, we might as well get something out of it, too. Even into the 2000s, the US government saw this as a virtue, not a problem. USAID publicity materials used to boast: “The principal beneficiary of America’s foreign assistance programs has always been the United States. Close to 80% of the US Agency for International Development’s contracts and grants go directly to American firms.”<sup>4</sup>

In theory, the approach is win-win—help yourself by helping others. But it didn’t work that way in practice. (A former USAID director admitted that these rules, set by Congress, were his “biggest headache” at the agency.<sup>5</sup>) Because just drilling a well isn’t enough. The well, by design, is going to be in constant use, and at some point, some part is going to break. And if that well has been installed by an American firm, using American-made parts—how is the local community going to fix it? Unless that community knows where to get a replacement part, and has been collecting maintenance fees from everyone so they can special-order that part from overseas, and is then able to install that part, what they’re eventually going to have is a nonworking well. That likelihood was largely overlooked at the time, especially in the rush to get these wells installed.

So many of the wells simply broke down—and stayed that way. Researchers studied these water projects two to five

years after they were completed—and found that between 30 percent and 50 percent of them had broken down.<sup>6</sup>

Some of the wells that did keep working were bringing up seriously contaminated water. After I got sick from drinking water in Guatemala, I designed the first water quality research test that Catholic Relief Services had ever conducted. I'll never forget trying to get all my testing equipment and chemicals (including flammables) onto the plane with me. I kept trying to explain to security that I needed all this stuff in order to assess the quality of water in the Dominican Republic. They looked at me like I was insane, but they let me on board.

The results of many of those tests were shocking. Typically, to measure the level of contamination of a water supply, you collect about 100 milliliters of that water, put it on a filter, let the bacteria grow, and then count the bacteria colonies you see. This gives you a rough sense of how toxic your water is. But if it's badly contaminated, you won't even be able to distinguish the individual colonies from one another. In that case, what you write in your report is "TNTC": too numerous to count. There were a lot of TNTCs in our report.

But even the best-case scenario—a well that works and brings up clean water—doesn't do much good if a community hasn't been taught how to keep water clean. We learn during childhood (and we had the lesson reinforced during the COVID-19 pandemic) that germs spread disease; we learn that washing your hands gets rid of those germs; yet despite all that, we've all been in public restrooms and seen people walk out

without washing. Imagine how much worse it would be if nobody in your community had that knowledge about germs, and if there were no sinks at all. The horrible irony of these habits is that clean water that had come at such great expense was being contaminated just as soon as it was drawn from the well.

Many of the new toilets were a bust, too. Pit latrines are often dark, small, enclosed spaces—and as you can imagine, they don't smell very good. It's kind of counterintuitive that a place that's so smelly can also be more sanitary. For many people, going to the bathroom out in the open air actually feels cleaner. So if no one explains that it can lead to disease, that it can cause human waste to get into the water supply, pit latrines will often go unused.

At the beginning of the Water Decade, there'd been a lot of talk about community engagement. However, truly engaging with the community, not just talking with people but really listening to them, takes work—especially if the project is being led by someone who lives in another country. And the Water Decade had started a rush to get these wells installed. Even though most water and sanitation NGOs in these areas did a bit of hygiene education, we could see that it wasn't reaching many people. In my work for CRS, I'd knock on doors and ask when the health worker last visited their house. And they'd say: "What health worker?"

Some organizations had begun to face up to these problems, while others could get pretty defensive. Even if they didn't say it this directly, you got the sense that they were telling

themselves: *Well, we did some good. We improved some people's lives. Shouldn't that be enough?*

And on a certain level, that's understandable. But once you began thinking about the water crisis as a massive affront to social justice that the world was urgently responsible for addressing, then it just wasn't enough.

Later on, I'd learn that this way of thinking is what separates what we now call social entrepreneurs from those who use traditional models of charitable investment: social entrepreneurs constantly take stock of their efforts relative to their goals, always evaluating whether their solutions are matching what the problem requires. And if they can't answer "yes," they move quickly to develop new solutions. But the term *social entrepreneur* hadn't yet been coined.

I left CRS for that job in Denver in 1989, just as the Water Decade was drawing to a close. Looking back the year after the Water Decade concluded, a leader at the World Bank said that the effort had "bequeathed to the world a glass of water half full and half empty."<sup>7</sup> There were certainly successes to celebrate: thanks to increased attention and smarter investment, 1.3 billion people who lacked access to clean water in 1980 had it by 1990, and 750 million had access to toilets for the first time.<sup>8</sup> That's safe drinking water for an additional 360,000 people per day and sanitation for an additional 205,000 people per day. For all the joking people do about UN-declared days and months and years and decades (mark your calendar for World Tuna Day, May 2), it really can make a difference to declare a common goal and rally around it.

But for all this success, in 1990 there were still 1.2 billion people who lacked access to clean water, compared with 1.8 billion in 1980. And there were 1.7 billion who lacked access to a toilet—*almost exactly the same number as in 1980*. How could that be? What we came to understand was that our efforts were just barely keeping pace with population growth. It's ironic, even perverse, but we were making progress without gaining ground. Governments didn't have the funds to increase their efforts. The "Buy America" rule generated a lot of waste, since it required shipping expensive parts and buying expensive plane tickets to fly in expensive American engineers. And other global problems were driving up costs: industrialization's mounting damage to the environment made clean water harder and more costly to find, and in the early 1980s, the global economy saw a downturn that left many governments and NGOs with fewer resources to spend on water and sanitation.

We had every reason to expect that the population would continue to grow, and the wells that the world had spent a decade building would continue breaking down just as the attention and funding the UN had directed toward the water crisis dried up. The Water Decade had been the start of something. But it also seemed, by 1990, like the end of something.



Someone needed to figure out a new strategy to combat the crisis. And maybe it was a bit audacious for our little baby NGO to think we'd be the ones to step in and change the way

this work was done, but I've always tended to plunge into solving problems—trying to solve them, anyway—without dwelling on all the challenges that might lie ahead. I'd figured out that if you want to make a change in this world, you just do what you have to do to get over the hurdle in front of you, and once you've done that and can see the next hurdle, you start figuring out a way to get over that.

I first learned this lesson long ago, back in high school, when administrators cut our soccer program. I was despondent. I had no idea how to reverse their decision, but I went to work on it regardless. I put together a plan and budget and somehow managed to get on the agenda of the school board to make my pitch. They agreed—the first hurdle was passed! But they gave us no funding for a new coach. So I coached the team my senior year. It's remarkable how much playing time you can get when you are the coach.

Later on, in college, I learned that a former campus minister from my school had created a program at another university that sent students on service trips around the world—trips to build water systems, schools, and health facilities. But the construction efforts proved to be a challenge because these were all liberal arts students; they needed some engineering expertise. So I created the Student Engineering Network for International Technical Assistance (SENITA). (I should have asked the liberal arts students to come up with a name.) I recruited other students to apply, professors to advise us, and engineering firms to sponsor our efforts. That Guatemala trip I mentioned happened only because of SENITA.



I didn't appreciate the dangers of what we were getting into. In Guatemala, I was chased by a pack of stray dogs and got bitten. Rabies shots were required. Then, the day I was flying home, a plane in Guatemala crashed. Members of my family were beside themselves until they learned it wasn't my plane. My mom implemented a policy: Whenever I got back to college safely, I was to make a person-to-person call home and ask for Chester. She'd say he couldn't talk, so the operator would disconnect us. Consequently, I was not charged for the call, but the message was sent and received: I was safe. And she didn't have to lie: Chester could never talk, because he was the family dog.

In the end, no students were injured in the making of SEN-ITA, and the work was a big success—I was even interviewed by the local newspaper and the local TV station about the program. So by the time I started IPSW, it had been ingrained in me that the best way to take on a big problem is to not let myself get intimidated by it, and just get to work.



We started crafting a new strategy to combat the crisis at IPSW—which, in a flash of either inspiration or common sense, we soon renamed WaterPartners. We didn't choose the name just because it sounded friendlier. Partnership—specifically with local organizations that built water systems—became the core of our strategy. Our partners were the on-the-ground, home-grown experts in how to tap local water sources, how to design water systems that could be maintained by the community,

and how to talk to people about hygiene in ways that broke through.

Of course, it's not like we came up with the idea of partnering with local organizations. But many of the partnerships between water and sanitation NGOs and local water organizations were more like flings than lasting relationships. The donors and the NGOs weren't putting in the enormous effort it took to rigorously evaluate the best local partners, and, perhaps inevitably, the partnerships didn't last very long. Either the local partner would fall short on execution or the supporting NGO would come across some exciting new project and redirect their funding there, leaving local partners hanging.

So WaterPartners was more focused than probably any other NGO in the sector on identifying the best local partners and collaborating closely with them over the long haul. Our evaluation process was extremely competitive—we vetted about twenty of these groups for every one we decided to work with. But once you became one of our certified partners, you'd stay one, as long as you kept doing effective work.

Once we found a local partner, we'd work with them to design a water system that was as simple as possible. Whether we were drilling a well, constructing a piped system, or harvesting rainwater, we relied on hand pumps or gravity, rather than complicated electric pumps, to move the water. We used local materials and local workers so that when problems cropped up, they knew how to fix them. And we worked with the community to make sure they elected a water board to manage the well and knew how to collect water fees—usually

called water tariffs—from everyone in the community so that the system could be maintained.

To many people, “community engagement” sounds like a fuzzy, feel-good thing, but we took it very seriously. I remember attending a festival in a town in Haiti—sort of an inaugural ceremony for a water system that our partner had helped build. A big spread of refreshments had been set out; a marching band was playing. We and our partners huddled with the leaders of the project and hit them with the usual questions: Who was going to collect the fees from the citizens? Where was that money going to be kept? Was there a bank account? In most cases community leaders had answers to these questions, but in this case, the response was silence. We asked about the system itself: Who here knows how to operate the valves? Again, no answer.

It was an awkward moment. (Actually, to be honest, it was a terrible moment.) Part of me felt like the compassionate thing to do was to let the ceremony go on, save everyone the embarrassment, and do damage control later. But as I stood there thinking about it, I felt that celebrating a water system that we knew was going to fail—that was not going to fulfill its promise to the community—was not an act of compassion, it was an act of condescension, as if hurt feelings mattered more than clean water. Clearly, we, the community leaders, and our local partners had more work to do. So after we huddled for a few minutes, our partners had the uncomfortable task of telling everyone that the opening was going to be delayed. They sent the band home.

It was a tough moment. I still wince thinking about it. But it was the right call. I spent a lot of time reflecting on what I’d

allowed to slip through the cracks, and I resolved to be even more thorough going forward.

Thankfully, we didn't have to deal with situations like that very often. As I've mentioned, as few as 50 percent of water projects are successful in the long term.<sup>9</sup> At WaterPartners, our rate was higher than 90 percent. So most of the water project openings I went to were full of joy—and the happiness far outlasted the inaugural party. For families in these communities, life changed fundamentally. Women got their days back, days in which they could work, and not just carry water. More girls got to go to school. Fewer children died needlessly of waterborne diseases.

There was simple joy, too, in water itself. When a community finally has a clean source of water, when water feels safe and no longer scarce, you see people, hesitantly at first, splash a little on their faces to cool down, splash it at each other for fun, let it run through their hands—wondering at it, thrilling to it. Something that had always been associated with stress and disease and even death was suddenly a source of refreshment and relief.

For celebrations like these, I'd bring along a banner my wife had made. She'd written WaterPartners' slogan in Spanish:

*DEL AGUA PROVIENE LA VIDA.*

"From water springs life."



I knew that getting easy access to water would transform these communities. But I was surprised to see that the process

of constructing these water projects did, too. Because, again, these projects weren't the work of, say, American engineers parachuting in, clearing a space, drilling a well, and moving on. These projects were a community effort in the truest sense. With our support, the gravity-flow water systems were built and run by the communities themselves, requiring neighbors to come together and work together for their collective benefit. That sense of shared obligation and shared opportunity is something I wish I saw more often in the United States. Because these were not just water projects. They were democracy in its purest form. For many of the people in these towns, selecting the members of the water board was the first time they'd ever voted.

The availability of clean water changed the patterns of life in these communities in more ways than we could measure (as much as engineers like to measure). One of the most important, and inspiring, was the change we saw in the role of women. A lack of clean water always affects the women in the community the most. Its impact on their lives is an indignity and, even more, an injustice. It robs women of their agency and power: knowledge, as the saying goes, is power, and a lack of clean water was keeping them out of school, keeping them from learning. Money, too, brings power, and a lack of clean water was keeping them from earning an income. But the arrival of a clean water source had, in some wonderful ways, turned the situation on its head. Because water was thought to be *women's* business, women ended up on many of these water boards, even chairing some—which gave them authority over the community's most

vital resource. Some women would form public health groups and ensure that water kept flowing. They were drawing power from what had once taken it from them, and when you talked to them, you couldn't miss the change in their demeanor. I'll never forget asking a community group, run entirely by women, if they'd allow a man to attend one of their meetings.

"Yes, of course," they told me. "If he's quiet and sits in the back."



I was thrilled with WaterPartners' progress. But there was always one big thing getting in its way: money.

I was always a lot more comfortable with doing the work than going out and talking about the work. For me, giving speeches and interviews was nerve-wracking. Standing up to ask people to give us their hard-earned money was even tougher. But I knew I couldn't opt out. Funding, for an NGO, is an existential issue. So whenever I needed to gather some courage, I'd always think back to one of my favorite quotes: "Evil flourishes when good people do nothing." That gave me the motivation I needed to keep speaking out, and over the years, I started getting better at it.

We'd grown slowly at first—expanding the dinners in Kansas City and Chapel Hill to various cities across the United States, and sending mailers asking for further donations. As we started getting good results, we courted larger investors, like foundations. Once, a single donor wrote us a check for

\$25,000. I couldn't believe it. It was five times what we'd raised the year before.

With funding coming in, we were able to professionalize. We built our first headquarters, though this might have been putting it a little grandly: our so-called headquarters was a second-story addition on the house where Becky and I lived in Chapel Hill. Still, it felt like an office. And when I say *we* built it, I don't mean a contractor. One Saturday, we got a team of volunteers together, cut half the roof off our house, and framed in the office. I also got a salary: \$100 a month. And we made a website, since the internet was now a thing. On a whim I registered a domain name I thought cut straight to the point: water.org.

By 1998, WaterPartners had raised \$250,000. For someone who'd chased down every dollar, it felt like a lot. The easiest way to boost our funding further would have been to apply for government grants. But I never wanted to go down that path. Maybe I was just disillusioned with the water and sanitation development world as I'd come to see it back in the 1980s. It felt to me that taking those grants would require us to keep following other people's instructions, however misguided they might be, instead of searching for better ways of doing things. I wanted WaterPartners to own its future, so we kept searching for private donors.

The person who delivered one of our biggest breaks had just experienced her own: the singer Jewel. Yes, *that* Jewel—the singer of “Who Will Save Your Soul” who, in the mid-1990s, had one of the best-selling debut albums of all time. Jewel grew up in Alaska in a house with no running water and an



outhouse in the back. I learned about Jewel's interest in water and sanitation from Marla, who reached out to her. Jewel agreed to meet with us, and over time we built a great relationship with her organization, The Clearwater Project. Eventually she committed \$400,000 to WaterPartners over the course of three years. We were hugely grateful for it. Steady funding like that is a lifeline for an NGO—it means you can plan ahead and invest intelligently.

Then Napster happened. If we'd hired a management consultant (and we didn't) to assess the biggest threats to our budget, there's not a chance in the world that a music-piracy website would have made the list. But when Napster allowed people to download music for free, the whole music industry was upended, a lot of artists got hurt, and suddenly Jewel's money—and our Jewel money—was gone. Napster, it turned out, didn't just disrupt the music business. It blew a giant hole in the budget of a small NGO. It forced me to get in my old station wagon and drive around the country, taking old donors to dinner and begging them to re-up their commitments.

The woman who ultimately filled the Napster gap was Wynette LaBrosse, who'd founded a tech company named Finisar with her husband. On my fundraising road tour, someone set up a dinner with Wynette in Palo Alto, and she made a commitment that covered the loss from Jewel and then some.

Soon enough, though, that funding dried up, too.

Then the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation stepped in and made our biggest investment yet.

Tech giveth, tech taketh away, tech giveth again.



But even as donations grew over the years, they never felt like enough. There were always so many great projects waiting to get started, so many projects that could change lives now, so many projects we were desperate to fund—but we couldn’t, because we didn’t have the cash.

Back then I looked at that as a WaterPartners problem. If we could up our fundraising game, I thought, we could fix it. And certainly I could have been a better pitchman. But now, I see that the difficulty I had was emblematic of a funding challenge that was much larger than that, and much larger than we even understood.

Today’s best estimates say that solving the water crisis would take \$114 billion a year for ten years.<sup>10</sup> Right now, the total development assistance going to water and sanitation is just over \$28.4 billion a year. Which means that over the next decade, we’re on track to come up half a *trillion* dollars short.<sup>11</sup>

As the *New York Times* writer David Bornstein once put it, trying to solve the water crisis through charity well projects is “like using an ‘adopt-a-highway’ approach to solve the world’s transportation problems.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, good luck.

It’s easy to feel defeated when you realize that your approach is destined to fail. But it’s also kind of exciting. It forces you to look at a familiar problem from a new angle. It opens you up for a breakthrough.

**COMING MARCH 29, 2022**

Available Through These Retailers

**amazon.**

**B** Bookshop

**POWELL'S**

**BARNES & NOBLE**

**Hudson Booksellers**

**TARGET**

**BAM!**  
BOOKS-A-MILLION

**INDIEBOUND**

**Walmart**

Let's work together to  
make the power of water  
available to all.

SUPPORT THEIR WORK &  
CHANGE LIVES WITH SAFE WATER

**Water.org**

 **subscribe**

    **@water**

 **@company/water-org**

