

## Scitizen Dialogue \_ Muizenberg 3 October 2018

Fables are stories that are told to illustrate a lesson or moral. To warm you up, here is a classic fable:

In a field one summer's day a grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart's content. A group of ants walked by, grunting as they struggled to carry plump kernels of corn.

"Where are you going with those heavy things?" asked the grasshopper.

Without stopping, the first ant replied, "To our ant hill. This is the third kernel I've delivered today."

"Why not come and sing with me," teased the grasshopper, "instead of working so hard?"

"We are helping to store food for the winter," said the ant, "and think you should do the same."

"Winter is far away and it is a glorious day to play," sang the grasshopper.

But the ants went on their way and continued their hard work.

The weather soon turned cold. All the food lying in the field was covered with a thick white blanket of snow that even the grasshopper could not dig through. Soon the grasshopper found itself dying of hunger.

He staggered to the ants' hill and saw them handing out corn from the stores they had collected in the summer. He begged them for something to eat.

"What!" cried the ants in surprise, "haven't you stored anything away for the winter? What in the world were you doing all last summer?"

"I didn't have time to store any food," complained the grasshopper; "I was so busy playing music that before I knew it the summer was gone."

The ants shook their heads in disgust, turned their backs on the grasshopper and went on with their work.

What are the lessons? The obvious: it's about planning ahead; about all play and no work leads to disaster; it could be about working together...

### **The other side of Day Zero: a modern day fable**

What can we learn from the story of Cape Town's Day Zero and the other side of Day Zero?

The city continued to extend far into new green fields that were once farms and veld. Its footprint grew and at each moment its growth is fuelled by increasing energy demands, and more water, more pipelines, more sewage, and more investment. Big issues dominate the business of the day: transport systems are increasingly inefficient and turn hours of human productivity into waste much to the frustration of tired, angry commuters. Big issues explode into protests that focus on land, more housing, better education and services. Urbanisation is called a problem. Yet the supply of water barely makes it onto the list of issues until ...until the crazy concept of Day Zero emerges. Until then there was no need to worry about water because the government has it in hand and has a plan, and even a long term plan.

After three dry years those plans look paper thin. Then comes a belated message to save water, but few are really listening or take it seriously. Day Zero heightened the attentiveness especially when Day Zero shifts from day possible to day probable. The conversation changes, and it is now in the workplace, at the dinner table, at parties, and in social media.

The fable is just beginning. The concept of a tipping point is a state or condition that is reached when one small element of a system trips up or fails and is followed by others that create a significant and more important change to the system as a whole. Therefore, we could argue that Cape Town dodged a major tipping point by squeaking through because of its technical and management skills, new investments in water resource management, massive effort on the part of citizens, and some luck or call it the 'miracle' of early winter rainfall. In reality, citizens saved the city. Will they do it again?

Just how resilient is Cape Town in dealing with shocks and stresses? The city was hugely underprepared for Day Zero but a lot of lessons have been learnt. We are more resilient but are we more sustainable?

There will always be goofy grasshoppers and compliant ants in society, but progress to becoming a more resilient city may be found somewhere between these two species. Compliant citizens are helpful; grasshoppers are playful, but there is a danger that neither species seriously engage with the underlying societal issues. In between there is a diversity of species, dormant, paralysed, but they have skills and capacity to engage and contribute to re-shaping the city from a state of 'business as usual' toward a more resilient, sustainable city that works hard to prevent the emergence of new tipping points. We need a new order that:

- (a) Establishes new ways to enable and support citizen participation.
- (b) We need a new order that strengthens policies and structures to enable the city and its citizens to cope with future shocks and stresses.
- (c) We need a new order to create a liveable, equitable city that closes the loop on its extraction of available resources, including water, and avoids any overshoot.
- (d) Finally, we need a new order in which designs and plans translate into implementable actions in order to build a city for our children's children and more. A future generation expects this of us.

Cape Town dodged a significant tipping point, but the supply of water is only one facet of the urban water cycle. In the future it might not be another drought that brings us back to a Day Zero but other parts of the water cycle that may have an even greater potential to cause new tipping points.

What do you learn from the story and the way it was told?

Kevin Winter

3 October 2018