

This is Lt. Roger McCort of The Salvation Army for today's Community Comment.

By now I think we've all heard about San Francisco's wacky installation of an outdoor urinal in one of their most popular parks. The receptacle is a cement circle surrounded by a few plants and a small screened fence. It allows one to pause and do what they must in a semi-private, but still able to look passers-by in the eye, location.

Mockery poured in from bloggers and professional publications alike. A New York Magazine reporter referred to it as being for the half of the population who can already relieve themselves on any street corner. Time Magazine used the ironic headline, "You Can Now Urinate in Public".

The city's \$15,000 investment in this room with a view may seem silly, but its necessity was summed up by one resident, quoted by the Associated Press as saying, "Honestly, we were ready to go... anywhere. So any facility is better than none."

This isn't a reality most of us notice. Since the invention of indoor plumbing every home and workplace across the modern world has one or more toilets installed inside an easily accessible private room. When you need to go, or even if you think you might have to soon, you just go. Then, as my toddlers like to sing, you flush and wash and be on your way.

If we are out and about when the need comes upon us, we simply seek the nearest restroom to our location and go there. We might need to ask a clerk for a key or directions to a backroom location, but there is rarely a time when we get turned down or away. Hey, we've all been there when the large diet soda you had with your drive-through lunch decides that it's spent enough time in your bladder and it would like out, please. NOW. Our natural inclination to help someone when they are standing before us in that little half crouch indicating the urgency of their need.

Except, if you are homeless, this isn't the case.

For our brothers and sisters on the street, their urgent need is met with frowns, rejections, or – in many places – the world’s most uncaring sign: No public restrooms.

2000 years ago the ancient Romans had public restrooms available on a large scale. They were designed specifically for those who didn’t have their own private locations. It was obvious to the builders that everyone needed to have a place to go or they would just go anywhere they could. It’s not as if anyone can decide to just hold it until they get back on their feet and get a place of their own.

Somewhere along the line we lost the level of compassion for our fellow human beings which permits them to use our restrooms when they need to. Most of the reasons we give for this have to do with people who take a long time or leave a mess behind. Those are both side effects of not having the same kind of free access that you or I do. If you could only get to a real toilet once a week, you’d take longer too.

One of the problems of having a large homeless population in northern California is the contamination by human waste in the places where people who are homeless congregate. More than 150,000 pounds of waste washes into Humboldt Bay annually from the Palco Marsh encampments alone. Having no public restrooms means that everywhere we live is a restroom for those who have nowhere else to go.

So if helping your neighbor isn’t your thing, let me encourage you to help yourself by taking down those No Public Restroom signs. Then you won’t have to worry so much about what you just stepped in on the street or at the beach.

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