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### Ode to the Engineer

*posted 2/08/2007*

A doctor, a lawyer and an engineer were debating the professional aspect of God. The doctor said, "I know that God is a doctor...when you look at the anatomy of the human body and its ability to heal, God can only be a doctor."

The lawyer disagreed, "Consider the precise analytical capabilities of the human mind. Unlike any other animal, Man is able to extrapolate logical conclusions from major and minor premises. God is definitely a lawyer."

The engineer shook his head. "No...you all have it wrong. God is a civil engineer. Only an engineer would locate a sewage treatment plant right in the middle of a recreational area." And this is true. I write about engineers today to both shed light on a group of misunderstood heroes, and to celebrate both their quirkiness and their genius. February 18th begins Engineering Appreciation Week.

This would be a good time to start thinking about gifts the engineer in your life might like....maybe a pot of cold, bad coffee, or a box of new, red Sharpies (extra-fine point). Better yet, spring for a subscription to "Concrete and Pavement World". Your engineer will be pleased, if not actually emotional from your thoughtfulness.

If you think that engineers are a legion of humorless, pocket-protected workaholics (male and female) with bad haircuts and more pens than Bic, you would only be partially right. Haircuts and pens, true. Humorless, false. Pocket-protected and work-driven, variable.

As a would-be architect and drafter, I had aspirations of working in architectural design after I graduated from college. But my first job out was with a large civil engineering firm drafting street and drainage plans. One drafting job led to another and I found my life littered with engineers twenty-some years later. I know of what I speak.

My old boss, Tom, likes to say (when he is waxing eloquent) that engineering is the SECOND oldest profession. He's not the sort of guy to say what he thinks the FIRST oldest profession is...although, knowing Tom, he probably believes that it's general contracting or land development. He illustrates his point by reminding the listener that short of standing naked in a field, an engineer of some kind is behind every other aspect of the human experience.

And he may be close to right...engineering is all about making observations, evaluating conditions and overcoming obstacles. Some early ancestor understood that a pointy stick thrown just right was more efficient than waiting around, hopefully, for edible beasts to die of natural causes. While prehistoric lawyers were working out hunting and gathering agreements, the engineer of the clan, no doubt, took note that it was best to put the community latrine downhill of the cave.



I am here to tell you that, as a group, engineers are not humorless so much as they are not frivolous. My firm had been in a particular suite of offices for four or five years. One day, I needed to make a run to the hardware store and I asked my colleagues if they needed anything. David said, "Well, if you are going out, we could use a new toilet seat in the men's room. The old one has been broken for a long time and it pinches when you sit down."

Until then, I had never had any occasion to visit the men's room, but I thought that a pinching toilet seat would be an alarming prospect for most men. So, I went in to get an idea of the general size and shape of the old toilet seat. To my amazement, the seat was broken in half and the halves had been duct taped together. This would have been curious enough to any one just dropping by, but the extraordinary thing was that the two halves were from entirely different toilet seats and did not match.

When I came rushing out of the men's room, all a-twitter after my assessment, the engineers just shrugged. No one remembered how this contrived toilet seat came to be or who contributed either half. It had worked pretty well all this time, but since it was starting to pinch, maybe a new one was in order.

Another illustration of the Engineering Mind occurred when the office kitchenette sink was backed up. Our offices were slightly below grade, meaning we were situated lower than the main utility connections. As you may know (or you will after reading this) water only flows downhill of its own accord. If you want water to flow uphill, you have to pump it up.

To counteract this basic law of nature, we had a small pump under the sink to pump the wastewater UP to meet the outlet that served the office building. The pump was malfunctioning and a steady cascade of dirty water was flowing over the edge of the sink. While it was filling up our shoes, four engineers were standing in a row discussing the problem.

Most agreed that the pump was operating beyond capacity. One suggested a maintenance problem; another estimated the holding capacity of the sink to pumping speed ratio; a third wondered if we should build an alternative drain for the dishwasher and install an additional pump. This went on for several moments, while the water continued to spill out onto the floor and run down the hall. I was diving for pans to catch the overflow and pour it...well...not down the sink. Engineers...they may not fix a problem, but they will spend a lot of time analyzing it. Graphs and a lengthy report will soon follow.

Then there's the Mr. Busy Beaver aspect of the engineering archetype that never fails to puzzle those of us without ambition. I looked out one morning to see my neighbor, Gail (an architectural engineer), standing in her driveway with a transit. She was shooting lines, and I deduced that she was about to undertake some massive home improvement - like erecting a dome or, perhaps, digging a moat (which I hear can add a lot of value to a property at resale).

But, no, Gail had launched a much smaller project. My engineer friend was surveying a plot about 2'x 5' next to her carport where she was going to set a couple dozen brick pavers in a herring-bone pattern. A brick saw was at the ready. Her mate was on his knees setting the batter boards and snapping the chalk lines to pour the tiny slab. On this little pad, soon to be perfectly plumb, level and true, she planned to set her garbage cans.

While we smile indulgently and shake our heads at the sort of compulsive building disorder (CBD) that afflicts many engineers, we would be living in a very different world without them. Early Homo habilis (man/woman the tool user) picked up a rock one day, used it to smash something open and never looked back. It was a very, very short leap from developing the pointy stick to building the Great Pyramid at Khufu in 2551 BC.

The startling thing about the pyramids is not just that they are these sturdy, huge triangular monuments strewn about in Egypt and Central America. That would be weird and wonderful enough. But what gives pause is that Nile engineers, surveyors and builders were already well-aware of the same engineering headaches that bedevil their modern day counterparts.

It took 10 years to level the plateau for the pyramid at Giza and 20 years to build it (and, probably, 40 years to get the Preliminary Pyramid Plans signed off by the Pyramid Permitting Department and another 5 to get consent from the Giza Neighborhood Association). Surveyors are thought to have used string and the stars for sighting. Comprised of four sides, each 750

feet long, the sides differ by no more than eight inches. Four hundred feet of stone rises above the burial chamber; the weight of the stone is buffered with five internal roofed chambers that direct thrust into the sidewalls.

This is still tricky engineering stuff by today's standards, and it is a testament to the versatility and tenaciousness of our ancestors that they bothered with it in the first place. I'm not going to get all Atlas Shrugged on you, but even the briefest list of engineering milestones should make you take a bit of shy pride in our species. I mean, beavers are swell and fine builders, but can they calculate tensile strength?

It would take a really big book of engineering achievements (and I have one open in front of me) to give engineers their complete due. The book at hand is *The Builders: Marvels of Engineering* (published by the National Geographic Society) and it takes you on a visual tour of what engineers have given the world with their intelligence, their creativity and, often, with their lives.

Engineers have addressed the need to overcome distance with roads, railroads, transportation, pipelines, canals and bridges. Engineers are responsible for creating functional public structures that include towers, tunnels, skyscrapers and sports arenas (the Roman Colosseum, begun around 70 AD, seated about 55,000; many modern stadiums are similar in design).

Engineers provide the means by which we harness the forces of nature - aqueducts, hydroelectric power, windmills, petroleum and solar power. Simultaneously, engineers construct the barriers to keep nature from coming in too close with levees, flood controls, sea walls, and earthquake-resilient designs. Engineers maintain the public's health and safety through water/wastewater treatment, and erosion control. And, in this most pragmatic of endeavors, engineers build out of an impulse to worship. Some unseen and ancient spark drives engineers to construct pyramids, temples, mosques, observatories, domes and cathedrals - enduring witnesses to the marriage of Earth and Spirit.

A black and white photograph of the Golden Gate Bridge hangs over my desk. Only the north and south towers protrude above of a carpet of seemingly infinite, roiling fog. It looks celestial...as if one would have to cross over to reach Paradise on the far shore. It makes me think that if we do, in fact, pass through a metaphysical tunnel after we die, God is an engineer.

**Note-to-Self 2:** The next time you drive onto the ferry and you, and your car, don't fall off into the ocean, remember the engineers who brought you the pier. The spunky Illahee has been in service since the 1920s, thanks to the generations of engineers who designed her, built her and retrofitted her again and again for over seventy years. Well done, and thanks.

**Note-to-Self 3:** A couple of weeks ago, my spiritual hunger was sated after I was led to Mr. Deity (mrdeity.com). I had been struggling with a difficult personal issue and thought that I would lay my burdens down and email Larry, Mr. Deity's "go-to" guy. Larry was kind enough to intercede with Mr. Deity on my behalf, and the following is our exchange:

Dear Larry:

I'm a little anxious about writing this...I've never written to a deity before, and am not sure how to phrase my supplication. Since you sitteth (sort of) on the right hand (I guess Mr. Deity is right-handed...that's what the Bible says) of Mr. Deity, I thought, perhaps, I could appeal to you first and you could put in a good word for me. You see, it's my Pomeranian...she has some kidney issues and combined with a bladder the size of a proton, my carpet is really suffering. I realize that you have a lot going on (what with natural catastrophes and all of those afflictions), but if you could intervene with some sort of miracle that would limit her to wee-weeing only two to three times per day instead of fifteen, it would really help me out a lot.

Keep up the good work. I like what you're doing with that Creation thing...it's looking sharp. (By the by, is Mr. Deity seeing anyone?)

Ingrid

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Mr Deity has already answered your prayers and many others on this issue: laminate

floors. Laminate offers both a style and affordability that cannot be beat for those with household pets. As far as seeing anyone, he sees everyone. He does request that more of you take more pride in your hair style. Thanks for your support!

Jimbo - a.k.a. Larry

**Note for Mr. Deity fans:** Episode 5 was posted on You Tube, Monday, January 29th).

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*Ingrid divides her life between the San Juan Islands (where her heart lives) and Austin, Texas (where her paycheck is generated). While Ingrid is spiritually promiscuous, she credits her guru, Jimmy Buffet, for her mantra ... "If we couldn't laugh, we would all go insane." Ingrid is a triple aspect Libra.*

Her column appears every other Thursday in San Juan Islander. To contact Ingrid, send emails to [ingrid@sanjuanislander.com](mailto:ingrid@sanjuanislander.com)



### How to contact San Juan Islander

#### EMAIL ADDRESSES:

- News tips, comments, story ideas, suggestions, etc. [news@sanjuanislander.com](mailto:news@sanjuanislander.com)
- Event info, calendar items [event@sanjuanislander.com](mailto:event@sanjuanislander.com)
- Letters to the Editor: [editor@sanjuanislander.com](mailto:editor@sanjuanislander.com)
- Advertising questions: [ads@sanjuanislander.com](mailto:ads@sanjuanislander.com)

#### STAFF:

- Matt Pranger [matt@sanjuanislander.com](mailto:matt@sanjuanislander.com)
- Sharon Kivisto [sharon@sanjuanislander.com](mailto:sharon@sanjuanislander.com)

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Mailing Address: **PO Box 1118, Friday Harbor, WA 98250**

Phone: **360.378.3748**

