

EH 102

2 October 2024

America: Land of the Free and Home of... Neglected Pee?

It is March 2021. The United States has just elected her 46th president and two months have elapsed since his inauguration. The nation's citizens represent perhaps a mixture of hopeful expectation and dim foreboding towards their country's future, depending on whether they view Joseph Biden's election a win or a loss. Regardless of side, though, there is a universal curiosity to see what the new leader's opening moves will be. Which of his many promises, reiterated ad nauseum during his election campaigns, will he fulfill first? It is in this climate of political adjustment that opinion columnist Nicholas Kristof raises a voice in favor of an improvement perhaps only lightly considered until now. Kristof's stance is that of all the U.S.' needed improvements, the necessity for restrooms available for public use ranks at the top. It is an issue that affects certain regions of the country less than others, and one that Kristof feels politicians have conveniently pushed to the bottom of the agenda, below more impressive-sounding developmental concerns like bridges, highways, and electrical grids. But it is an issue that nevertheless deserves attention and action. In his compelling article addressing America's lack of public restrooms, Kristof makes use of strong, emotive language alongside real-life stories and current and historical data, thus successfully awakening his audience to this problem and galvanizing us into action.

Kristof hits the ground running with intentionally selected, emotionally charged vocabulary, which right at the outset serves to jolt his readers awake to how big of a problem this really is. Rather than remain aloof and esoteric in his language, he uses phrases like "scandalous

lack” and “disgraceful infrastructure” to impress upon the audience that this is not just something that concerns an impassioned few. Since it is a problem that affects a wide range of U.S. citizens, Kristof presents the issue as one that should also engage the majority of U.S. citizens: he is calling us to arms, inciting feelings of disgust and outrage that such momentous faults could be overlooked. As responsible members of society, this failure of appropriate public bathrooms is one we must not continue to overlook! Throughout the article, Kristof continues to make use of charged language that appeals to readers’ many different emotions. For example, by crafting the instance of humorist Art Buchwald’s need for a restroom as “an increasingly desperate search,” Kristof activates readers’ sympathy (whether we realize it or not) as fellow human beings for the difficulties our comrades have faced. By pointing out that society has “painstakingly built new norms” surrounding pet waste, yet neglected the matter of disposal of human waste, Kristof can grab readers’ attention with this intense adverb, more so than he could with a commoner one. Kristof infuses his article with similar charged language until the very end, reaching readers’ sense of anger, injustice, disbelief, and compassion. Kristof knows that if he can get his readers to believe in the importance of this issue for ourselves, we will in turn act.

Close upon the heels of his well-placed vocabulary is Kristof’s excellent use of historical comparison, which serves to highlight some disparities between what has been called the greatest nation on earth and less advanced or less affluent nations. Readers might be wondering why the lack of public toilets is such a horrible failure, to which Kristof replies by reminding us that “Greeks and Romans had public toilets more than 2,000 years ago...if the Romans could figure this out two millenniums ago, surely we can.” Here, Kristof appeals to America’s pride in progress. Our government’s message to us for decades, even centuries, has been that we are progressive as a nation, leading the way in improvements of many kinds, a forerunner for other

nations to follow. So how can we be fine with allowing an ancient system to outdo us, when we have the benefit of thousands of years by which to do better? When faced with the question, most Americans would prickle and declare it must not be so!

Another particularly noteworthy example of Kristof's use of historical comparison focuses on America's very own prior attempts at public restrooms: "In the 19th century, the United States did set up public toilets in many cities...In the early 20th century, these were supplemented by 'comfort stations' for men and women alike, but most closed in waves of cost cutting over the years." This data begs the question, 'If we could do it then, what is holding us back from doing it now?' While establishing his credibility on the topic by invoking relevant historical facts, Kristof is again appealing to Americans' pride in our nation, perhaps getting us to ask ourselves, 'Why have we declined in quality in this area? Are there other areas in which the standard of American life has decreased since the 1800's and 1900's? How do I feel about that?' By demonstrating that the U.S. once had what it now lacks, Kristof makes his audience feel like a solution is not so far off, which, combined with the patriotic pride this evidence insults, makes readers more likely to get involved to support a solution. Additionally, by sharing knowledge of his topic within its broader context rather than as an isolated situation, Kristof imparts to his audience this same sort of context-based understanding. This is effective since the purpose of Kristof's knowledgeability is not to impress his audience, but to encourage us to stand behind this cause, which he can much more successfully inspire by establishing himself as a trustworthy voice.

Along with historical evidence, Kristof supplies a bounty of current, international evidence for his case as well. Readers might be wondering if the lack of public restrooms is such

a big deal, or if it is something all countries deal with, to which Kristof promptly responds, “Japan manages what may be the world’s most civilized public toilets – ubiquitous, clean and reliably equipped with paper – and almost every industrialized country is more bladder-friendly than America. Even poorer countries like China and India manage networks of public latrines.” Yet again, Kristof appeals to his countrymen’s pride, this time pride in status. Why should countries with fewer financial resources, countries that America has soundly displayed dominance over in times of war, countries that have no inherent superiority over us—why should these countries outpace us on such a simple matter as public toilets? *Surely* this is not a challenge we lack the wherewithal to face. These are the questions Kristof subtly puts to his readers by weaving current data into his arguments, thus establishing himself as a reliable author upon his topic, not simply spouting opinions, but well-grounded on the facts pertaining to his topic. The effect on his audience is twofold: both reinforcing his own credibility and spurring readers to support this call for change.

Another wonderfully effective strategy Kristof employs is to invoke the stories of real-life individuals whose lives have been radically impacted by this need for available toilets, which goes far in gripping readers where it matters most: the heart. It is easy enough to brush off national issues when our plates are simply too full of our own daily concerns; at these times, we do not feel we have the emotional capacity to take on a single problem more. But when the issue is condensed from a matter of millions to a matter of, say, four, as in the case of Walter and Ritania Rice, we are much more likely to pay attention and respond. Kristof recounts the incident in Ferguson, MO, where the Rice parents took their two toddlers to the park to play. With no public toilet available, the children ended up peeing behind bushes. As a result, Walter was arrested for child neglect, held in jail, and later found guilty. This is only one example Kristof

chooses to include in his article; others demonstrate the toll this problem has taken on citizens ranging from tourists, public service workers, and homeless persons. These are our neighbors, Kristof is exclaiming. For their sake, take a stand for this cause, otherwise you might find yourself the next in line for the jail cell. By including the true experiences of regular citizens in his article, Kristof sets himself apart as someone who cares about the plight of the people, and it is this quality of empathy in activists that goes far in attracting a fervent following.

Kristof clearly feels strongly about the need for free, quality public restrooms. Yet, he does not force his opinion on his readers. His style is not abrasive, his tone not demanding. He conveys urgency without aggression, necessity without coercion. Rather, he packages his convictions in almost a casual way, something his readers could pull out their phones and read on the subway to work, or while on lunch break. He makes his content accessible to the average American citizen, and this is a great achievement. Rather than feeling bogged down by the end of the article with heavy legal language or frantic concern, readers instead feel motivated and even a bit entertained, despite the gravity of the content. In this way, along with the various rhetorical devices he utilizes throughout his article, Kristof successfully relates to his readers, draws awareness to a very real problem, and imparts a sense of confidence that what is currently a dilemma need not remain so for long.

Works Cited

Kristof, Nicholas. "America Is Not Made for People Who Pee." *The New York Times*, 6 Mar. 2021, www.nytimes.com/2021/03/06/opinion/sunday/public-toilets-united-states.html.