

Stepping Out in the Swan Range

A Sobering but Hopeful Solstice

By Keith Hammer

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This year Winter Solstice brings not only the shortest day of the year for the northern hemisphere, but sobering economic trends around the world. It is my hope for the coming years that these harsh adjustments lead to a better world - one based more on thrift than speculation, and more on bettering the human condition than on the profits of advantage and plunder.

Indeed, we need only look to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's inaugural address of March 4, 1933, to read advice as applicable to today's recession as it was to the Great Depression:

"The money changers have fled from their high seats in the temple of our civilization. We may now restore that temple to the ancient truths. The measure of the restoration lies in the extent to which we apply social values more noble than mere monetary profit. Happiness lies not in the mere possession of money; it lies in the joy of achievement, in the thrill of creative effort. The joy and moral stimulation of work no longer must be forgotten in the mad chase of evanescent profits. These dark days will be worth all they cost us if they teach us that our true destiny is not to be ministered unto but to minister to ourselves and to our fellow men."

It appears we need to relearn lessons lost on us since the Great Depression; namely that we cannot depend on baseless speculation and unsubstantiated credit to carry the day. Although most of our parents from that era taught us to be thrifty and live within our means, television and other media have bombarded us with commercial messages quite to the contrary - alongside credit card companies and other financial institutions.

After a period of affluence for many, it appears that the notion and practice of thrift may once again become popular, if not essential. Perhaps it is time again to heed the advice given by Francis Sisson during the Great Depression: "Thrift was never more necessary in the world's history than it is today."

When I was a kid, a toy could be purchased for a few dollars and would fit underneath the Christmas tree. Today we see ads in the newspaper that call \$5,000 to \$10,000 ATVs, jet skis and snowmobiles "toys" and promote the purchase of \$20,000 to \$65,000 ATV and snowmobile trailers called "toy haulers." And, because they don't fit under the Christmas tree, these "toys" often necessitate a third, fourth or fifth garage stall alongside the family house.

Shall we continue this trend toward extravagance, or shall we again teach our children to live within their means by gifting them a sturdy pair of hiking boots or snowshoes that fit under the Christmas tree? As Theodore Roosevelt put it,

“Extravagance rots character; train your youth away from it. On the other hand, the habit of saving money, while it stiffens the will, also brightens the energies.”

Indeed, teaching our children to stand on their own two feet will build character and rob them of nothing worthwhile. As W.G. Sibley wrote:

“Make no mistake. The habit of thrift robs one of no proper pleasure, clouds no worthy outlook, narrows no life, hampers no laudable ambition. On the contrary, it adds immensely to the joys of human existence, widens every prospect for usefulness and honor, broadens the horizon of opportunity enormously, and makes possible the realization of lofty aspirations.”

Indeed, how we respond to economic change will determine the world we leave our grandchildren. More immediately, every gallon of fuel we conserve by car pooling, choosing non-motorized recreation, and buying fewer fuel-intensive luxuries will help lower the demand and price of fuel needed by folks with low incomes to heat their homes this winter.

Above all, it is my wish for this Winter Solstice, Christmas and New Year that all of us going through tough economic times be able to recognize what is essential to our homes, health and happiness and what is not. To this end, I'll close with a quote from my most trusted adviser, Baloo the bear in Disney's "The Jungle Book:"

“Look for the bare necessities, the simple bare necessities
Forget about your worries and your strife
I mean the bare necessities, old Mother Nature's recipes
That brings the bare necessities of life . . .
And don't spend your time lookin' around
For something you want that can't be found
When you find out you can live without it
And go along not thinkin' about it
I'll tell you something true
The bare necessities of life will come to you”

Keith Hammer grew up hiking, skiing, camping, hunting, and fishing in the Swan Mountains. He has worked a number of jobs, from Forest Service trail worker to logger to backcountry guide, and currently works as an environmental consultant and head of the nonprofit Swan View Coalition. His column appears regularly in this paper and is archived at www.swanrange.org. Keith can be reached at 406-755-1379 or keith@swanview.org.

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Swan Rangers stand on their own two feet atop the Swan Crest. Keith Hammer photo.