

On the Path

What a Wonderful, Affordable World

By Keith Hammer

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I heard an old tune made famous by Louis Armstrong the other day and it struck me in its simplicity and beauty. Indeed its beauty lay precisely in its simple observation and recognition:

“I see skies of blue, clouds of white
Bright blessed days, dark sacred nights
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.”

Hearing “What a Wonderful World” gave me pause to wonder why we allow life to appear or be so complicated and fast-paced – often to the point where we overlook and undervalue its simple and most important gifts. The short song teaches by example, speaking in the sparest of words about nature’s gifts and concluding a “how do you do” greeting between friends really means “I love you.”

Perhaps it is key that none of the valuable gifts in the song cost a single penny. They are indeed gifts that can be freely enjoyed and freely given – which reminds me of an experiment in marketing conducted by the Washington Post in January 2007 to gauge consumer perceptions of quality.

The Post enlisted Joshua Bell, one of the world’s most accomplished violinists, to play incognito as a street performer at the entrance to a Washington D.C. Metro station. Bell played classical masterpieces for 45 minutes on his \$3.5 million handcrafted Stradivarius while just over a thousand people passed by. Only seven people stopped to listen. Three days earlier, Bell had played to a full house at Boston’s Symphony Hall, where decent seats cost \$100.

The Post’s Gene Weingarten wrote that the notable demographic exception during the experiment were kids, who without fail would stop to listen to the music maker only to be pulled away by hurried parents. Quoting the poet Billy Collins, Weingarten wrote “all babies are born with a knowledge of poetry, because the lub-dub of the mother’s heart is in iambic meter. Then, Collins said, life slowly starts to choke the poetry out of us.”

Weingarten also took note of folks who passed by Bell without even noticing his violin due to having their ears stuffed with ear-buds plugged into personal media players. Have you seen the commercial on TV where a young person arrogantly shuns joining a half-dozen friends playing guitar in a city park in favor of shoving in his ear-buds and walking off alone? Is our breakdown in community and social values just an unintended consequence of such commercialism? Or is it in fact a concerted effort to replace the warmth of no-cost community sharing with the purchase of gadgets that promote personal isolation and necessitate a heightened pursuit of hard, cold cash?

Fortunately, there are signs that our natural sense of music, poetry and wonder has not been extinguished by modern-day life and that it may be experiencing a bit of a revival during the economic recession. The Missoulian reported in January that a record number of people spent time in Montana State Parks last year as well as in Glacier and

Yellowstone National Parks. Both National Parks saw an annual increase of some 30% in front-country camping and Glacier saw an astounding 52% increase in backcountry overnight stays – which require a backpack trip and a greater commitment of time and energy.

Simultaneously, nearby hotel tax collections fell between 6% and 9% due to fewer stays and rates reduced to attract business in a sagging market. In short, as money has gotten tighter during the recession, folks have turned to less expensive ways to recreate but still get out of the house. And they're turning to the free or low-cost adventures and relaxation provided by America's public lands.

At times like these we are reminded that the best things in life are those often taken for granted – and that we must take care not to let them fall by the wayside from neglect. In the end, it is a matter of priorities and whether we take the time to pay attention to what is truly important in life.

Do we notice the trees, the sky, the clouds? Do we take time to appreciate music performed by a real person, whether amateur or professional? Do we take a moment to extend a courtesy to a stranger or to greet a friend, or do we simply scurry along in a vain attempt to keep up with the impossible?

As Louis Armstrong sang so simply yet eloquently:

“I see trees of green, red roses too
I see them bloom for me and you
And I think to myself, what a wonderful world.”

So I am reminded to stop and smell the roses and to value the gifts at hand.

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.



Skiing in the Swan Range with friends? Priceless. Keith Hammer photo.