

Winthrop Valley Life: But at Least

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When assessing something, I like to rely on scientific data when it's available, and conjecture, speculation, and personal experience when it's not.

Thus it came to be that when I took a moment to judge the quality of summer 2021 (which according to the Gregorian calendar is not yet over, but effectively is for any parent of a school-age kid), I determined that this summer will not advance to the quarter-finals in the Best Summer Ever (BSE) competition.

Oh sure, we've had some high numbers. Our string of consecutive 100+ degree days was impressive, and Winthrop became a national household name when we achieved the worst air quality in the country in late July (472! Or 638? Or 719? Anyway, it was a big number!). We also received either a gazillion or not-quite-enough Instant Air Purifiers, capable of cleansing our smoke-choked households as well as getting a batch of short ribs for four on the table by dinner time. We couldn't compete with other towns in our county for the highest number of COVID hospitalizations and deaths, but that sure didn't stop us from trying. And let's not forget the sum of all those Level 2 and 3 evacuation notices pinballing through neighborhoods as the Cedar Creek Fire marched its way southwest, giving all three upper valley towns an equal shot at that worst air quality title. So yeah, overall, we got really big scores.

But as we all know, bigger is not always better, and more is sometimes less, as is the case with summer 2021. In fact, more was decidedly less these past two months. More heat, more fire, more smoke meant less swimming, less hiking, less climbing; less biking, riding, boating, camping, and other summer



recreational activities. Less working outside in favorable conditions, less sleeping through the night. Less tourism, less revenue for local businesses. Less was clearly not more this summer; it was—if this is even possible—lesser than less. And it doesn't take a math wizard to know that a score of "less" does not make one a contender for the BSE award.

I've decided to console myself for this devastating loss with a few rounds of a little game my siblings and I play, which I like to think of as "but at least." The way this works is that you reframe a crappy situation in a way that highlights two of its worst elements, which, paradoxically, forces you to laugh against

your will and somehow makes you feel marginally better—albeit temporarily—about the whole miserable experience. For example, “The hotel was grungy, but at least it was expensive.”

For summer 2021, it worked like this. “It was too smoky to go outside, but at least every time I went out I got stung by yellowjackets.” Or “Friendships were lost over mask mandates, but at least it was 94 degrees and 80% humidity in the living room.”



Overheard in the grocery store, one man to another: “Things good in your world? House still standing, no COVID?”

This is what it’s come to? These are our criteria for checking the “life is good” box—house unburned, health intact?

Well, sure. It may be just a consolation prize, but we’ll take it. Because when you imagine saying “Well, my house was decimated by wildfire, but at least I got COVID,” suddenly all the rest of it — the smoke, the heat, the restless nights — seems pretty manageable. It wasn’t the Best Summer Ever, but at least it’s not a contender for the worst.

