

Life in Minnesota 2

Here's another installment on life in Minnesota. Remember the phrase, "We're not in Kansas anymore"? Well, Minnesota is not California! It is pure white Americana around here...no Blacks, Latinos, Asians, no one of any color whatsoever. More than one person has told me, "Beware of Minnesota nice," whatever that means, often said with a hint of cynicism. I think I know what they mean, but I can't quite put my finger on it yet.

They do things quite differently around here too. All the grocery stores require that you load and unload, bagging your stuff, and then unloading it into the car (never mind that you have to unload again into the house ☺) The message to California wimps is, "You're on your own here, Buddy!" You have to read your own water meter and call in the number to get billed. The garbage company is run by a family out of their home and they can't seem to make up their mind on whether or not this or that thing should be recycled and, "Oh, we pick that up every other Tuesday," and so forth, as if I can remember to do that. One of the most annoying features of this garbage contract is that we have to remove labels. Ever try to remove labels from wine bottles? Try using C4, it will take you a while.

By the way, you can't park your car on the street during the hours of 11pm to 4am...why? Because of city snowplows. Doesn't matter if your guests are visiting friends or relatives; you'll get a big fat ticket and possibly have your car towed if you have a persnickety person that day, writing tickets.

Shopping for food has become quite interesting. The first thing you notice is that everyone, and I mean everyone is overweight –why is that? Then I look at the shelves of the grocery stores and suddenly I notice that the entire front section of the store has foodstuff greeting a hungry person that is highly processed, high in fats, loads of sugary stuff and cans of soda pop for good measure –nothing that's healthy or good for you. Fresh vegetables are tucked away in the back of the store, and their fruits and vegetables are wimpy as in look and feel. I've yet to find a sturdy bell pepper with an iron smooth skin. There's tons and tons of pizzas of anything imaginable, lots of Mexican products (minus the people), particularly beans and tortillas, loads of Italian pasta –all quick "filler" products families on tight budgets can afford, but from a long term health perspective, are creating ticking time bombs for heart disease, diabetes, you name it. Also, this is pork heaven –isles and isles of pork products and more ideas for sausages than you've ever imagined. I've never felt so thin, and I'm no Tinkerbell.

Automatic car washes are king around here. You absolutely want to get your car cleaned as soon as possible because if it's snowing while you're driving, your car looks like it's caked in mud and the coating is real thick. After a few days, you can't stand it; you've got to get it cleaned! Fortunately, they're all over the place, like liquor stores, which I'm sorry to say, is the culture here. Beer drinking and mixed drinks is the mainstay of a guy's day. You can't buy wine or beer in the grocery store. You have to go to a liquor store for that and I have a sneaking suspicion that kind of set-up, encourages drinking of heavy liquor. Maybe that's a dumb assumption, but it would be interesting to see some statistics on it.

Eating out means chain restaurants, unfortunately, and they are God-awful! Although, I suspect that the closer you get to Minneapolis, the higher the star rating status. That's one thing I've noticed. You walk 5 paces and you can find a darn good restaurant practically anywhere in California. Not here. That's one reason I'm cooking so much, but that's okay, I like cooking for family, particularly for How. He's so easy to feed; he'll eat anything and call it *cordons bleu*. Hey, it is *cordons bleu*!

The wall, partitioning off a small bay of the 3-car garage, finally went up with a door and window. Gas was plumbed in already, so I had a forced air heater installed in a corner up in the ceiling. I needed a utility tub installed too, so water pipes had to be plumbed in as well. That took some

doing. The electrician put in all the wiring I needed, including 220 for my kiln. He also did some rewiring in the house. You'll love this...every room has a ceiling fan (we do have air conditioning) and the lights, of course. Well, in some rooms the first switch turned on the fans and in other rooms, vice versa. It's a stupid thing, but it drove us nuts, so the electrician straightened them out. We had him wire the house for sound speakers in the kitchen/dining room area, attached to the vaulted ceiling. There wasn't enough lighting in the basement --just two lights with a single bulb in each and it's a large area, so we had him add recessed lighting and a series of track lighting to light the bookcases for dramatic effect. Also, interestingly enough, the basement had little or no additional plugs or telephone jacks, which took some effort to install. Now the room is a functioning office; one half I've taken over with my drafting table and art books, and the other is How's space and all the equipment you'd find in any office.

We started unpacking the glass (8 crates full --about 300 sheets total) and found two breakages so far. I think they cracked because of the cold. With the heater now installed, the garage can stay a cozy 50°. With another couple of weekends and How helping me, I should be able to get the studio up and running. By the way, while I was in California, a former church client called about adding 8-10 windows, so I met with them. I was performing at Stanford and they were a few blocks up the street, so it was convenient to squeeze in a sit down. I did 8 windows of pre-Christian saints of the British Isles about 15 years ago and now they decide to do this additional project, just when I've moved the entire studio to Minnesota. What impeccable timing!

On a brighter note, given the cold weather that we have, one is forced to rethink hopping into the car at a moment's notice to get this and that item, so you economize and do all your errands in one shot. You can kill one whole day coordinating shop stops to the pharmacy, hardware, bank, dry cleaners and/or grocery store --2 or 3 of them sometimes, to find nutritious and healthy foods. It feels like a full-time job sometimes. Still, I've got this big house to play in, I mean, it really feels like a doll house you can move furniture around. I can tinker with that or do some reading, which I absolutely hunger for, or do some baking. That's the other thing about living in this weather -- there's something about cold weather that brings home and hearth to mind, and you want to bake bread all the time or do a little sewing (where's that material I bought years ago to make a dress?) Then for extra pleasure, I can pick up my guitar (I have 2 of them) and strum/sing a few tunes. You can do all these things because it's so quiet around here, except for the din of TV's CNN in the background. That's a small addiction I have, unfortunately. I worry about the Bush administration and how dangerously incompetent these people are. It's like a tidal wave you don't want to turn your back on.

Movie houses are not much of a cultural draw around here as they are in California. I guess we were a little spoiled in Santa Cruz. There, after a night of movie going, you could walk to a huge, comfy, warm bookstore, browse around and maybe sit a bit to take in some reading that interested you --then hop on over to a coffee house, like Starbucks, the cultural icon of the baby boomers for some designer coffee espresso and something sweet and disgusting. In Howard Lake, in either direction, we have to travel 15 to 25 miles to go to a movie and often, it's in the middle of nowhere with nothing else to do, but turn around and go home again. Also, they're never showing anything that's currently released, nor is anything they offer to eat or drink, remotely edible or good for you, let alone inviting or tempting as a late night treat. That's not fun.

So now we've become Netflix *aficionados*. For \$14 a month, mailed directly to your home, you can see 2 currently released movies at a time, as many as you want or can view, all month long. The DVD's come with a self-addressed, stamped envelope so when you're done viewing it, you simply drop it in the mail, and the next movie you have listed on your queue gets forwarded when they receive the envelope back. Regarding queues, you just keep adding to the list of movies you want to see, in numerous categories, and the choices are endless. So what that means is, we see new movies at home, with our designer coffee (courtesy of our daughter's endless supply to us), topped off with something I've baked earlier in the day as our "night out" on the town. The only difference is, we're snug as a bug in our bed, dropping crumbs on the bed sheets, which ends up looking like the bottom of a bird's cage. Oh well, such is the life.

I haven't been able to figure out the politics of townships vs. districting as is done in California. We're surrounded by dozens of little towns, called townships, each with a council and mayor. The populations of most of these areas are just under 2000. That's quite a change from 265,000 in all of Santa Cruz County. We live in Wright County with a population of 90,000. One of the chief reasons, I think, these townships are so small is because so much land lies between each individual farm. There are no mountains so naturally, in addition, there are less people, but they need services and infrastructure like everybody else. I started thinking about politics in Howard Lake mostly because of the stinking garbage company, no pun intended. I'm going to take my time though, before I become the nail sticking up in the carpet.

Finally, during my trip concertizing and ending at Grace Cathedral, SF, I realized that I've got to 'get in the game' again music wise. I miss it a lot. So, I've started the ball rolling and next Wednesday, I'm going into Minneapolis to meet up with the guy who runs the gargantuan music program at St. Olaf's (Catholic) Cathedral. They have several choirs, including different children's choirs. He boasted that he has 140 ministers of music –140, can you imagine that? Anyway, he told me that Minneapolis alone has over 45 professional choirs, let alone St. Paul. God knows how many they have. He wants to hear my "instrument," as he called it, so I'm going to go and meet him, to interview him, not the other way around.

Well, it's almost 4pm and Howard will be home soon and I have to prepare dinner. God, it's so nice to have him home at a decent hour. One other thing that we're going to do right away is observe Shabbos from now on, for the simple reason of having How turn off the computer and not think about work for 24 hours. Do you get Time magazine? There's an interesting cover story this week about kids, "Are They Too Wired for Their Own Good?" It talks about how the brain multitasks or toggles tasks, and those requiring high concentration, are done sequentially, not all at once. This was important reading because How was falling into the same trap of trying to do several things at once and was feeling overwhelmed and not succeeding at any one thing. He's running 3 projects and it looked like it was starting all over again, the craziness. Two days ago, I read this article and said, "Enough already!" We're observing Shabbos and for 24 hours he's going to rest his body and give some down time to his brain. Observing Shabbos is a "da..." no brainer.

Thus ends the second chapter of our life in Minnesota with more to come. It's an evolving story and adventure, which we hope you too are on "for the ride"...Love always, Maria

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