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Spring came very early this year, catching everyone by surprise. In fact, it was so sudden that it seemed to happen over night. I think it was the first week in March when the snow started melting really fast. News on TV reported so many incidents of people falling into thawing lakes –some of them drowning. I remember driving a long stretch of road one day and noticing that all the barren trees with their spindly brown branches, were suddenly bursting with blisters of various colors of greens, pinks, ambers and white. The whole topography of the land is green again and there is a kaleidoscope of color everywhere you look. It's breathtakingly beautiful.

I'm finding my way around the area where we live, but there are still frustrations finding the simplest things. When I wrote last, I think my harangue was misunderstood as a broad-brush impression of Minnesota as a whole. Burdened now with 20/20 hindsight, it was an unfair characterization because what I was kvetching about really, had more to do with living in Howard Lake, 41 miles from the heart of Minneapolis. Well, guess what? I received a well-deserved rebuke from Bill Booth (Bill & Nancy, our friends living near Bemidji) and I promised him that I would send it to everyone, so one and all could get a more balanced view of Life in Minnesota. Here's what he wrote to me:

...Your Life in Minnesota is actually Life in a Minnesota Suburb, or rather Minnesota Exurb. You live in a Howard Lake "culture" which is quite different from a Minneapolis or St. Paul culture. A privilege of living in the big city is that you have a concentration of drama theaters, movie theaters, book stores, concert halls, colleges, art museums, terrific grocery stores, a concentration of nice shops, grand churches (with fine sermons and remarkable choirs) and temples, a mixed population speaking 75 languages, lovely parks. A privilege of living in the exurbs is that you can buy a lovely house near a lake and a golf course for a reasonable price. What's missing in that area is exactly what makes the house affordable.

He made an excellent point and I guess I shouldn't have been too judgmental. I was ashamed of myself, actually, and wished I hadn't written what I wrote. In the final analysis, our decision to move here was all based on the price we could not afford to pay for a bit of culture. The "richness" that we were used to anywhere in California, was sacrificed in buying a home in the exurbs of Minneapolis. That's an appropriate description of where we live, which will now be part of my new Minnesota lexicon.

One of the nicest things, however, about living here in our neighborhood is watching the children play. Our house is situated in the cul-de-sac in such a way that all the activities of each and every house are in full view from my kitchen window. Last Saturday, while I was preparing lunch, I noticed that every garage door was open and the streets were littered with people --children on 2, 3, and 4 wheel mobiles, some of them gas powered and they were not wearing helmets (not in California!) including their parents! They were riding on their own 4-wheeler toys, tossing ball with the boys and girls, or mowing the front lawn. It was a bright, warm and sunny day and...well.... I don't know what it was...it all just seemed like a delightful bustle of families, out of doors, doing family things and the whole scene seemed extraordinary to me. I particularly noticed how engaged the fathers were with their children. I don't ever recall having an experience like that on the street where we used to live, i.e., watching or hearing the gaiety and laughter of children playing on the street. Those kids in our former neighborhood, were more apt to be playing Nintendo, talking on the cell phone or sitting glued to the computer, accessing God knows what, watching TV and getting no exercise.

When we first moved here, everything was covered in snow and we didn't see hide or hair of our neighbors except for some of the children, so we had no idea what kind of neighborhood we planted ourselves in. The school bus (God, remember school buses?) would drop off the children at 3:30pm and by 4pm, precisely, they came out all bundled up to play in the snow, to sled down

powdered slopes or play ice hockey on the street, which was always cleared of snow by the city. Last Saturday, it was as though the whole street came alive in full Technicolor, along with the steady appearance of birds, waterfowl passing over our lakes, and all the animals of the woods that have come out of their winter boroughs. I know this because every county road is suddenly littered with road kill, which is a little depressing and sad to see. Still, if all that is not in step with the coming of spring, I don't know what is.

Except for the metropolitan area of Minneapolis/St. Paul, Minnesota is basically farm country. Most, if not all of the people I meet in Howard Lake are farmers. This is a part of America not really appreciated or understood by the vast majority of Americans, I think. In this technological era, it must seem to them that they are living in a parallel universe. You can see it in their eyes. Farmers, we hear, are no more immunized against the global economy than we are. Small family farms face a persistent siege against encroaching development or consolidation. Large corporate farming is eating up the little guy. You should see the farm machinery they operate. The cabs attached to this equipment looks like the inside of a space shuttle –computer screens and touch pads everywhere. I think you have to have a college degree to operate them.

There are steeple churches everywhere, and most particularly in Howard Lake. Religion is a big part of their lives, obviously. A lot of businesses you find open in California, are closed on Sundays. The heart of the city is about 2 blocks long. On that street are the city hall, the 86-year-old pharmacy (very cool interior), a pit stop grocery store, the post office, and the lousiest video/DVD rental store on the planet. I think the last movie they purchased (VHS) was 10 years ago. Thank God for Netflix! As I meet people at the post office or pharmacy, they all seem to wear the same stoic countenance, shop at the same clothing store (gingham is very popular, not a bad thing), and wear baseball hats, women too. Everyone I meet and talk to is very nice (note Minnesota nice, again, I don't mean in a negative way), but I sense too, an emotional distance of some kind. It's definitely a feeling of separation –there is them, and there is us, a "sameness" that is a little unnerving, I guess, to someone coming from California. I can't quite put my finger on it

Sometimes, when I'm standing in line for something, I watch and observe people, and look at their eyes. What is it I see?... Resignation, perhaps? These are 'salt of the earth' farming, God-fearing, good people. I wonder if they are simply bewildered and overwhelmed by what's going on today, having no control to make it stop and take account of it. And here I am, living among them. I am so different, and maybe too exotic. I don't know. I wonder what they think of me and I ask myself, should I try to blend in or just be myself? In all humility, could I be a little scary to them? I don't feel sure of myself or know how to act. There are moments when I get horribly depressed and I think to myself, "What have I done"? I spend a lot of time questioning that, what I'm doing at the moment and why. Is it the lack of cultural stimulation? Or is it me? It's interesting, however, to watch his or her reaction when I tell someone that I moved from Santa Cruz, California. They are uniformly dumfounded and ask, "Why?"

What I am sure of is that I've got to get reconnected to music, and that's exactly what I did. Through my former conductor, I was referred to a colleague who runs an immense choral program at St. Olaf's Catholic church, right in the heart of Minneapolis. I met with him, auditioned and I think he was immediately smitten. St. Olaf has about 10 choral programs and he invited me to perform with his premiere group as section leader (section leaders are paid, I might add), for Sunday services, which is broadcast live on local TV and radio stations throughout the Minneapolis/St. Paul area. He's already lining up repertoire that I can do as a soloist. Yikes! ...live on TV/radio. I hope I haven't bit off more than I can chew. I've done 2 Sunday services already and there are 6 more weeks before they break for the summer. This director and I thought this would be an optimal timeframe to figure out if this group is right for me. Regardless of what happens, I know he is thoroughly delighted to have me and so far, I like him too.

It's exactly 43 miles (one-way) from my house to St. Olaf's downtown Minneapolis and for now, it's just the medicine I needed. I'm feeling energized, but I also understand 15, 20 years from

now, it may not be practical for me to drive such distances for cultural stimulation. But for now, it's enough sustenance.

Going to temple also is going to take on more importance in our lives as we make our way in Minnesota. I am so glad the fates moved us closer to Minneapolis when we were house-hunting. It's a terrible thing to say, but I was beginning to feel spiritually isolated in Howard Lake along with the absence of culture. The things we take for granted. Who knew that belonging to a Jewish community would be of such high priority? And here's the best part regarding our fate moving to Minnesota. God sent us Laurie and Jim Brickwedde, the Jewish couple who literally took us under their wing and continue to do so to this day. Both of them are mensch's and we absolutely adore them and they us, I think. If we don't know where to find something, they do and immediately make themselves available for us. Several times when we got lost in Minneapolis, we would call Jim for directions. One time when we called, Jim was in Duluth –dropped whatever he was doing and proceeded to give us the most precise directions possible. They invite us to their home for Shabbat dinner (I think we owe them 10) before we all go to shul and they make appointments with us on weekends to do sightseeing.

Four weeks ago, we stole a weekend and made the 3 and a half hour trip to see the Booths. Going to the Booth's Cry of the Loon Lodge, which they operate year round, is a sanctuary of peace and tranquility on Kabakona Lake. Howard says he always feels "centered" when he's there. They are an incredible pair of people, devoted to each other, their family and friends. We have been close to them for over 33 years. Bill was an English professor at Santa Rosa Junior College and I was a teaching assistant to him, helping him read English IA papers. On this trip to visit them, they took us to the Headwaters at Lake Itasca, where the Mississippi River begins. You can literally walk across it, balancing on foot-sized rocks to do it. It's maybe 8 to 10 feet wide. You look to your left and see the huge stillness of Lake Itasca, which at the time when we were there, was still half frozen. And then you look to your right to see where the river begins its corkscrew wind, and I immediately thought of Lewis and Clark and canoes navigating the initial tight turns before it disappears from view. Imagine floating on the Mississippi all the way to New Orleans. This is American history and geography at its finest and you begin to appreciate how beautiful this country is.

So, between the Booth's and the Brickwedde's, we are in loving hands and good care. These are blessings we do not take for granted. Somehow in this good fortune of friends, an invisible presence has placed us between these two families, to safeguard our journey to a new life in Minnesota.

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