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I just realized that 3 months flew by and all of our friends, you in particular, are probably assuming we've forgotten about you. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, it's becoming clear to me (less so with Howard at the moment) that we will not retire here. I want to go back to California when we do retire –as Joni Mitchell sung “Back to California, coming home.” Maybe not to Santa Cruz per se, but somewhere on the coastline of California, Big Sur maybe. The flatlands here are just that –too flat. I miss mountains to hike, tall redwood trees, and the sound of the ocean crashing on rocks. Who would have guessed missing the sound of water crashing on rocks would be something you'd miss?

We are members of a conservative congregation, which regardless of religious ideology, is very much like Temple Beth El in temperament and commitment to Judaism. The choir is excellent and the cantor has a beautiful spirit and voice to match. He is what I call a “vanilla” tenor, you know, the Irish tenor singing “Danny Boy.” We are making friends here and some of these people are super individuals, but we live in the countryside and socializing with these friends means driving miles to join them in whatever activity we've/they've coordinated for the day. It's a bit of a hassle, the driving part. And it does mean a whole day is kind of “shot” because of the extensive driving. They all live closer to the Twin Cities, of course, but housing is way out of control. You think Santa Cruz is bad? Oy, we're talking serious money, here. There are some places where you'd think you were in la-la land.

We've thought about moving closer, but the trade-off of trying to stay employed in your late 50's with the salary commensurate to one's longevity and experience and being able to afford a \$2-3000 plus mortgage per month, is just not practical or doable. These days you can't count on having a job, period, and/or having medical benefits to afford the investment of a nice house –never mind the commute it would require, plus the physical and emotional stress for good measure, which we tried to put behind us in the first place.

Howard loves the work he's doing (finally, out of computers) in the medical device industry and he is learning a lot, but he is keeping his eyes open to find a better-paying job because he's making a third less –not because it's Minnesota, but because the place where he works is in the countryside, closer to our home, west of Minneapolis, where the Silicon Valley of the medical device industry is located, pointedly called Med-Valley.

He does, however, leave work at 5pm, something he has never been able to do in over 30 years working in Silicon Valley. And believe me; his co-workers are out of the door at precisely 5pm! He doesn't bring work home anymore. He eats dinner at a decent hour; we observe Shabbos, which means he can be on the computer, for example, but only to play. And my, has he learned how to play! He finally built the clock he's talked about for over 30 years. He had all the parts made and he put it together. It's wonderful to see him so happy.

Living in Minnesota doesn't mean that regular expenses cost any less, however. That's a fallacy. The regular stuff like groceries, household expenses, repairs on things or having things installed (like rain gutters –not required in new development or building codes) are more expensive because in addition to the work you need done, you get tacked an additional \$75 trip charge. I love that –a “trip charge.” It's the biggest scam perpetrated on countryside folks. The guy could live within a ten mile radius and still he/she charges a trip charge.

So you see, having that extra third part of salary Howard is worth or owed, would be helpful. We'd like to be able to pay our bills. It will be almost 2 years How has worked underpaid with no salary increase, not even a cost of living increase. We've got higher deductibles and co-pays with the company's healthcare benefits, which rises in double digits every year (same as California); our property taxes went up 18% (there's no cap like CA) and just about everything else is getting more and more expensive, but wages are heading down toward the basement.

Don't you love it when you hear the Bush Administration boast 4% unemployment and those 2 million jobs that have been created? Of course, they don't mention that most of those jobs are minimum wage service oriented or that the middle-class is losing ground with stagnant wages and ever increasing costs for healthcare benefits. Oh, and let's not forget taxes. Minnesota has high property taxes, assessed at 100% of market value. Assessors walk around here with skull and crossbones emblazoned on their backs –not well liked, as you can imagine AND, I should mention, people love their guns around here. Scratch that –long barreled shot guns.

The political scene is pretty much a rigged system too. Everyone I talk to, business people and families are all upset and pissed off at the city council, yet they keep re-electing them into office because they don't know of anyone else to run opposed to these guys –and I do mean “guys.” No gals allowed; it's a men's club and if you're not a member, you don't count for much.

The “open meetings” statute is something from the dark ages of the 50's in California, before the Brown Act took form and laid out specific details of what constitutes open meetings and how the public gets access and executes power. Here in Howard Lake, as in most small country towns, lots of special or workshop meetings are held behind closed doors. Agendas and minutes are not current or posted in current fashion so the public has no idea what happened last or what's to come in future.

It's a bizarre environment to me having been an active community organizer and the problem is so large and endemic that I've kind of locked myself up in the house, which is the only environment I can control and is my domain. I can pretend in my head that I'm back in California. It's only when I step out of the door that reality hits and I'm a stranger in a strange land and I just don't “get” these guys.

Word got around about my community organizing skills so a couple of pastors have invited me to a few meetings to talk strategy, particularly about getting a grocery store, which they no longer have, after having had one for 85 years. But I told them it's their town; I'm too new and I can't drive the bus. They have to do that and fill the bus with members of their congregations. I can post signs and show them how to take their town back, but I can't drive the bus; they have to. So it's up to them to organize all eleven pastors and their congregations around this issue and execute an “action” on the city council to enforce accountability.

Not surprisingly, I've been significantly depressed so I sought out a psychologist, who just happens to run the entire central Minnesota mental health center. He doesn't normally do clinical work, but he's a fan of my columns and he helped Howard, who was a pretty beat up soldier when we first arrived in Minnesota. Anyway, talking to him has helped a lot and I think I have another friend. Coincidentally, his son is attending UCSC, can you believe it? The last time I saw him, he mentioned that he was going to Santa Cruz to visit his son. I immediately responded, “I hate you!”

Attached are the few columns I've written since I last wrote so in addition to this letter, you'll have a more focused sense of my “Musings of a Transplant,” which is the title of my column. So far there have been no complaints and a lot of compliments. I was at the post office the other day; three people were behind me and while the postmaster was giving me my stamps, she and the others behind me said they loved the column. Nothing like feeling a little “exposed,” but it was also nice to learn that people are noticing the column and who's writing it.

Got to go now. I hope you are well and as always, you must know how very much we miss you and think of you, often. Maybe, in fact, we will see each other again, but that will be in about ten years or so...Love always,
Maria

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