

Life in Minnesota 11

It's August now and we're in the midst of summer. Lots of humidity, warm muggy days and nights and thank God for air conditioning.

I tried working in the studio recently, but within an hour I was so hot and sweaty that I turned myself in and said, "Maybe another time." I was all set to do some painting and firing, but fighting the heat while concentrating on some new techniques squelched that idea. I was reading about the Mayan civilization in a recent National Geographic and found a picture, actually a rendering of a Mayan woman that I want to paint and fire on glass just for the hell of it.

I shouldn't feel so bad about the hot weather considering its 107° at the moment in Texas. I never thought there would come a time when I felt some sympathy for Texans, but 5 deaths due to heat exhaustion is no laughing matter. They say here that it's going to be cooling off, maybe into the seventies during this next week.

As some of you know, How is working at a medical device design manufacturing company on contract. This is his 6th week and he is thoroughly enjoying the place, its people and the intimacy of the company in general. It's small enough to be on a first name basis with everyone including the president of the company.

How has been setting appointments to meet with everyone integral to the operation of the organization. So far it's an impressive group of people, which the president is proud to boast are the best in the industry. He uses that as a selling feature to contract new clients. I guess How now falls into that category. He just got his name plate mounted for his office, spelled correctly I might add.

The plan is to bring How on permanently when some contracts come to fruition (where have we heard that before?), but we're not holding our breath. This has been the song and dance since the great lay-off of '01. After 8 solid years of trying to get out of computers, How has finally reached the pinnacle of his career, which is to work in the medical device industry particularly in development. But it was always the chicken and the egg thing: no experience having worked in the industry, yet over qualified in his field of program/project management.

He's a generalist, a systems person who navigates between hardware and software engineering and plays traffic cop on various projects. That's a job that even medical device companies need and that's where How operates cross-functionally. It shouldn't matter if his entire career was in computers, with the exception of the last two years, of course. There aren't too many people who can do that job as well as How. That's his gift.

Hopefully, it is one project at a time as opposed to 4 at a time with the 350 emails a day. To this day I still blanch when I think they did this to him. That is what drove him out of Silicon Valley. Fortunately in Minnesota, people value family time and you can hear the front door swinging with people leaving around 4:30 pm so that by 5pm, the place is nearly cleared out. That never happened in California, ever. They don't work their engineers in a nutty environment, although there's still the push for excellence as always.

My depression is much improved being managed by a new cocktail of pharmaceuticals. I don't know why it took so long, but it took a while to find out that the depression was principally biological or physiological, not entirely psychological. Anyway, that has brought some stability to my life and I'm feeling much better.

As to the drugs, two of them are new drugs, which of course is hellishly expensive even with the insurance. How doesn't care though what it costs, but it's an embarrassment to me that I physically need them to coexist. The neurophysiologic or biological science behind this and the advancement of understanding of this stuff is amazing. It's also reassuring to know that it "isn't all in my head" or hormonal. I'm just one of those fortunate people who have access to these drugs. So many don't or the vast majority who need these drugs can't afford them.

Coincidentally, it's just like the realization I recently had about seniors and hearing aids. Who the hell can afford hearing aids at \$4000 a pop? Why are they so expensive? That's like requiring a prescription to purchase shoes and you know what? A lot of seniors who are hard of hearing go without, particularly if they're on fixed incomes. That's criminal. Jeesh, don't get me started!

But my involvement in seniors' issues is another saving grace besides the music. I'm on hiatus right now with both musical groups, but the activities on senior transportation and being on the central Minnesota advisory council on aging is giving me enough stimulation to get out of the house for meetings. The meeting place is in the metropolis of Buffalo, a sizeable town of over 10,000 people about 26 miles away.

The politics is different however, even though the issues are the same –want of medical, dental, vision and hearing aids. Mental health is grossly under diagnosed or treated. I can't think of a more miserable existence than aging in such dire straits for simple needs such as getting your teeth cleaned, getting new glasses or hearing aids. It makes me fear getting old myself without the cold comfort of insurance to cover these costs.

Universal healthcare is a strong motivator in Minnesota, one of the few states in the country where the issue itself has strong currency. But for my money, not enough is done on behalf of seniors. I don't know why. The biggest complication is that for a state our size, there are only 5 million people and spread out over large expanses of land outside of Minneapolis or St. Paul. That makes infrastructure difficult and challenging for lack of funding. Hence, the year old 35W Hwy. bridge collapse.

Recently, another bridge slightly collapsed when a sheared off batch of concrete fell and barely missed smashing cars to smithereens. I don't know about you, but I've developed a severe anxiety (of late) of crossing bridges, although it hasn't reached the compulsive stage yet. There's talk of rechecking all bridges in Minnesota, but it's just that...talk! What we in the non-profit and political sphere like to refer to as "unfunded" mandates.

Now for a bit of irony: The political aspects of my involvement are that I am forced to be extremely circumspect and careful about what I say or what I ask. MDOT is the Minnesota Department of Transportation, a monstrous bureaucracy and I asked for things like a cost benefit analysis on specific funding for additional hours on busing and people looked at me as though I was speaking a foreign language.

I said to myself, "Okay, no cost benefit analysis required," yet they're spending tons of money on the basis of a survey that went out to 1500 people, which asked if they thought expanded hours were needed. Over 300 people responded and because the majority said yes that they need extra hours, MDOT funds it without real data?

Just like that! It's times like these when I feel like a Republican and wonder where my tax dollars are going – based on what, a "What do you think" survey? The survey also said that hearing aids are needed, vision care and etc. Will we get funding for that? Maybe, maybe not. That's the state human services department. Did I mention this is looking and sounding like Alice in Wonderland? Okay, I said don't get me started.

When next I write it will probably be the holidays. High Holidays are fast approaching because rehearsals begin in two weeks. I don't know where the year '08 went, but it's flying by. Next thing we know, it will be Christmas and then on to a new year, '09.

By then I hope How is still employed and on a tenured track, but then again, I'm expecting the hammer to fall. You know...Chicken Little expecting the sky to fall. Any day I expect How to come home and say they had to let him go. That anxiety just won't quit for me, but I'll feel better when he's full-time. Let's all pray for that, please.

Got to go now...Hope all is well with all of you who are near and dear to us. We miss you greatly. How's happy here and if not for that small grace, I'd be beyond myself. We'll stick it out as long as we can and as long as How can do what he's always wanted to do. It's wonderful to see your husband go off to work, happy...Love always, Maria

August 7, 2008