

Casting aside the shadows

Fall is creeping in already.

I see leaves on trees beginning to turn color. I noticed it as a passenger in our CRV while my husband drove us to St. Paul to see the Body-Worlds exhibit at the Minnesota Science Museum. I decided right then and there that I would watch every day for the signs when all the hues of amber take over.

You see, it was fall of last year when my husband and I came to Minnesota to house-hunt, and both of us were stunned by the beauty of fall here. Has it been almost a year?

The temperature is noticeably dropping, as well. No more sweltering above-90-degree heat waves.

Curiously, there is a perceptible scramble going on to plant trees and evergreens. Two weeks ago, I went to our local nursery in Howard Lake to give them a list of trees I wanted to plant, and they were so swamped, it is highly unlikely that I will be able to plant before winter gets here. So, I will patiently wait until next year, and plant in the spring.

Every day is a new lesson on life here. We moved to Howard Lake, a Minneapolis metropolitan "exurb," because we could not afford housing near the Twin Cities. We have a lovely house, but we have found that anything requiring a service call gets a premium "trip charge" attached, on top of the service call charge.

One painful example was the \$400 dollars we had to pay a Hutchinson company to fix the air conditioner. After coming out twice to fix what the first service guy missed, they discovered, in the end, that the "pull out plug" was not removed when it was originally installed. Imagine

Musings of a transplant Maria Stolz Howard Lake

that! Four hundred dollars to remove a "pull out plug." And the hits like that, just keep on coming.

It's interesting to me that much of California is disparaged as having an unbridled car culture. There, public transportation is ordinarily disdained.

Minnesota, on the other hand, is a car culture of necessity. Excuse me, I should say truck culture, and they buy from Detroit's Big Three - big time. You know, it occurs to me that maybe they owe a debt of gratitude to the entire state of Minnesota?

Speaking of gratitude, you cannot imagine how relieved I am not to see beggars on the street or homelessness in Howard Lake. Homelessness is so common in California, particularly in Santa Cruz.

The year we left, 32 people died on the street during winter. Can you imagine that? It was an appalling, relentless struggle and worry for me as a human services commissioner. But here, I don't see it, so I don't worry obsessively about it anymore. These are blessings right now for me that I cannot even count.

Like living a small town life in Howard Lake. This is a culture that connects people to each other in some very profound ways. Some relationships, I'm learning, go back to their respective childhoods.

There are social gathering places

where men and women meet at separate venues on a regular basis. One such place is the pharmacy in Howard Lake.

Besides being an all-round drug-store, a tiny corner is carved out that is a cool replica of the James Dean era. It has the requisite stools, soda pop counter, and a few tables with chairs.

One particular morning, I stopped to pick up a prescription, and there, in that corner, was a group of lively septuagenarian men regaling each other with their stories. John, the pharmacist, told me they have been meeting in that spot since they were young kids.

Imagine the loyalty and fraternity they have had with each other all these years. It was a touching sight.

In a couple of weeks, my husband and I will be celebrating the Jewish New Year, Rosh Hashana. It will be the year 5768.

The "shofar," or ram's horn, will be blown to herald the beginning of the New Year, and the time for repentance 10 days later at Yom Kippur. We are reminded that if we waste years in pursuit of shadows and vain things, we have gained nothing for ourselves or for humanity.

In my short year in Minnesota, I have secured a spiritual place in my heart where I can listen to the inner voice of calm and rectitude, casting aside those shadows and vain things for something better. Here, I think, I listen and see better.

As much as I yearn to return and live near the ocean again, it is a new year and a new beginning for my husband and I, and we chose Minnesota to begin the journey.