

I See Lakes Everywhere; I Must Have a Dirty Mind!

The COLA Call

by Ed Mutsch

This fellow was having some mental problems, so went to see a psychiatrist who, as part of the diagnostic workup, sent him off for a psychological assessment. At one point in the evaluation, the psychologist administered a Rorschach Test. After being shown an "ink blot", the patient would pause for a moment, then describe in vivid detail the salacious scene he saw depicted there. After about the twentieth such episode, the psychologist exasperatedly exclaimed, "My God!! You have an incredibly filthy mind!!!", to which the patient indignantly responded, "Me????? You're the one in possession of all the dirty pictures!!!"

I have reluctantly concluded that I am caught in the same predicament as the patient in this story, since virtually every encounter I have had lately puts me in mind of our lakes and our collective disregard for them.

I was reading a Bret Stephens piece about global warming on the Opinion Page of the 8/28/07 edition of the Wall Street Journal when I came to the following two sentences: "It's easy to be indifferent to far-off and diffuse threats. It's hard to work toward solutions the benefits of which will not be felt in our lifetime." I completely lost my focus on the global warming thrust of the article as my mind kept drifting to the sad applicability of this sentiment to our care and concern for Hubbard County's precious water resources.

The tragedy of the collapse of the 35W bridge in Minneapolis has prompted reams of newsprint and hours of air time decrying the irresponsible American reluctance to adequately invest in new, and maintain old, infrastructure. Officials are scrambling around now, inspecting public roads, bridges, and other structures and putting forth some estimates of the costs of bringing everything "up to snuff". Those costs are truly hair-raising. While our lakes, rivers, and wetlands are natural resources, not man-made infrastructure, the cacophony of complaints about American negligence could apply equally well to them. We spend too little on the maintenance of these public waters, and what we do spend is too often in response to problems that could have been avoided if we had been steadily conscientious in our stewardship year by year.

The American health care system is close to collapse, with costs now exceeding 16% of our GDP and expected to increase to 20% by 2015; no other country in the world spends more than 11% and most of these other countries have better medical outcomes. At the same time, over 44 million Americans are uninsured. The implementation of any solution to this problem will be agonizingly difficult, but the solution itself is maddeningly and deceptively simple; it has to do with prevention rather than cure. If we could wave a magic wand and---- presto!!---everyone immediately stopped smoking, consumed a proper diet, lost a few pounds, and exercised regularly, the growth rate of our national health tab would slow, the tab itself would level off, subsequently decline, and ultimately grow at a rate no greater than the rate of population growth. The national healthcare debate is beginning again as the presidential aspirants begin to trot out their plans for controlling costs and providing access. But as I listen to these debates, I find myself hearing not about healthcare but about the lakes. I cannot help but feel that we could and should be doing more to protect and preserve them, that we should be relying more on prevention and less on cure.

Some very dear friends of many years came to spend a few days with us a couple of weeks ago. I'll call her Mary (to protect her privacy); I'll call him Steve (because that's his name). Steve has always been one to have a lot of "toys", serially speaking, i.e. over time rather than simultaneously. He either has or has had cars, trucks motorcycles, scooters, ATVs, snowmobiles, RVs, etc., etc., etc. I must also say---admiringly, not disparagingly---that he is something of an anal-retentive personality who takes meticulous care of everything. His garage is cleaner than the home of the most meticulous housekeeper; one can truly eat off his garage floor. His toys are always kept as clean as when they were on the dealer's showroom floor. He is always very well informed on new and used "toy" prices, always paying the lowest, and receiving the highest, price for them. Thus,

when he tires of a particular toy he passes it on to another in "like-new" condition and incurs the lowest possible expense in the overall buy/use/sell process. As I admired Steve's new Kawasaki scooter and listened to him extol its virtues, my mind kept drifting to how I thought we should be caring for our lakes, i.e., spending protectively on them on a regular basis, taking the best care of them while we are using them, and passing them on to the next user in "like-new" condition.

As this is written, the county budgetary process is well underway, with the 2008 tax levy increase of around 4.5% undoubtedly set by the time this article appears in print. During the give and take of the budgetary struggles one commissioner was reported to say that the tax levy should be set in relation to the county budget not in relation to assessed county value. That's true as far as it goes, but the budget in turn should be set in accordance with a well thought out conclusion about county needs and priorities; it should not merely start from the level of the previous year's budget with each department attempting to maximize its increase while the county board attempts to minimize the overall increase. Water resources are Hubbard County's most precious resource. It should be at the top of the priority list. The ESO office is the county's major guardian of this resource. It is not receiving funding adequate to the demands on the office. Like the 35W bridge, this is a tragedy in the making.

Our family regularly comes to spend time at the lake with us. While all our times together are wonderful, some of the most precious are when each of our grandchildren come for their individual summer week with Papa and Geema; they await their time with uncontrollable excitement and invariably call Mom and Dad toward the end of their stay to see if they can stay longer. I oftentimes find myself imagining a future in which they come to live in the place they have come to love so much.

Such, of course, is a totally unrealistic expectation for all sorts of completely practical reasons. And that is just as well. The wonderful place they knew in their childhood will probably not be here.

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This column appeared in the September 8, 2007 edition of the Park Rapids Enterprise under an alternate editor-selected caption.