

Remembrances

One of the, I guess, benefits of getting more laps around the sun is the accumulation of memories. And as your days continue you can never really tell when a memory of something small and unrelated will pop into your focus. Posture does not bring it forth; although upside down on a utility pole would probably bring a few with immediacy.

I don't know if activity has a lot to do with the percolation of such mental recollection. I do find it delightful to which the details, real or imagined, begin to play before me

From my balcony on the third floor overlooking a semi-busy and almost important street, I was watching, an electric public transit bus pull over to the corner stop across the street. As it came to a stop air was released. Whether it was brakes, doors, or perhaps just a safety release, I could not tell you. But I think the whoosh of whatever struck a chord somewhere in my mind. As I waited for the bus to move on, revealing the curious collection of passengers destined for the neighborhood homes and perhaps the pubs, my mind wandered. I found myself watching my father going through the ritual of lighting a Coleman camping lantern.

Open the valve three twists. Cover the hole on the little plunger tip and pump. The instructions said 20 times but we always added a few more. Then quickly close the valve. Next a wooden match would be taken out of the box and as the match was struck the lantern valve would be turned on and the match positioned under the mantles now filling with gas. Wa—La! Light.

But not just any light. For a ten-year-old boy who felt his heart was in the woods. Any woods, but at the moment the one they were camping in reigned supreme. The lantern meant adventure. There was a slight smell as the gas ignited with a gentle whoosh. And shortly after that the lantern would get carried. Into the woods in search of something ("I think I dropped it on the path") or somewhere. ("Well they said just follow the left fork in the path. But it is advisable to bring your own paper."). Every camping trip you could rely on it. No two occasions were ever identical and always a bit of an adventure.

They say the no memory is completely accurate and that the mind will supplant details for the benefit of the human attached. And they may be right. Who am I to argue with published authority? But if that is accurate, I gotta tip my hat to my mind. Somehow, I recall legitimate, vivid details. Details so crisp and clear you (I) swear they are happened events.

I was just standing there tonight when I smelled the lantern as it was lit. And then, the most marvelous thing occurred. I heard it. A Coleman lantern makes a particular noise as it functions. You have taken a highly flammable custom liquid, added significant pressure, and then opened the valve. The resulting sound of the gas erupting from the burning area is not so much like a hiss of air. It is throatier and somewhat more melodic in nature.

Ya never know when a memory will strike or what the recollection will lead to. "Moments" that lasted but a brief time now come back in full resolution and drag with them a chain of details somehow conjured by your mind.

In his lifetime, my father never made more than \$36,000 a year. And a good portion of the scale was in his later career as a journalist.. In spite of that, he provided for a family of a wife and six boys. When it came to family vacation, the family went camping. At a state park where rates were low, the family station wagon filled with people and supplies would descend on the woods, looking for the rented campsite..

For accommodations my father had secured an Army/Navy Surplus, heavy canvas, poles included, six-man tent. It came in two pieces. One was a bag that held the tent and was almost big enough to be a body bag. Heavy as all get out. And then there was the plywood, long and narrow box, hinged on the long, for the poles, the ground stakes, and ropes.

As the years went on, my father bought a used cookie delivery van and converted it so that it held a queen-size mattress and an ice box. He said he was tired of being on an air mattress. (Note there weas but one air mattress in the tent. . . his) And there was plenty of space under the mattress that spanned the real wheel covers for the tent.

The tent setup was always a matter of delegation and cooperation. It took everyone of us able to lift or pull to put that beast of burlap up and sturdy. They say you do something long enough you could do it in your sleep. We nearly did. And if haf-asleep counts, we did it. That tent went up regardless of the weather. If we got tothe campground after sunset. . . oh well. And those times were not infrequent, but just part of the vacation.

It was in a state park, in the midst of a late morning/early afternoon time that the aforementioned station wagon arrived at the campsite.. It was my father's custom that once a particular thing started – such as a drive of any distance – bathroom breaks were not considered.

The station wagon pulled in to the space and the doors opened to an outpouring .of abundant adolescents. The tent site was scouted as we had been taught and when a suitable spot had been determined, we would scour the plot of sticks or rocks and clear the tent spot. The tent would be brought to the site and the assembling would begin. The tent would be unrolled and corner stakes driven into the ground. Two would go inside with corner poles and set them with a metal post appearing through a grommet, just waiting for a rope. The brothers doing rope duty would lash a rope to a pole and then run it to a stake.

It was at this point that I was about to make family history. I asked my father if I could be excused to go to the bathroom. The bathroom was a communal structure at the top of the hill we had passed coming in. He told me to hurry and I took off to find relief.

The bathroom facilities in a state park, at least in Ohio then, were extremely functional and basic. At the top of this hill was a long building. The front half, closest to the street was the men's. The side toward nature was the women's. The urgency of nature was pressing heavily upon my. . . thoughts as I dashed through the entrance at the end of the building.

My next steps established me in the family history and perhaps it marked me as truly unique in some ways you'd never want to cling to..

I quickly entered the building and headed for a stall, grateful that I was the only person there. I went into a stall and closed the door. The bathroom in question had five sinks, across from five stalls. There were three urinals on the short walls. And then there were the identical entry doors, blocked open. Upon exiting the toilet stall I realized I had gone to the center stall. Of the five, I had chosen number three. Things would have been so much simpler had I paid attention on my way in and opted for a better number two location.

I washed my hands and went out the door to the right. As I walked out, doubt walked in. That stretch of road going into the woods – nothing but road and trees == did not look familiar. I went back inside the bathroom and went out the other end. That road looked just as anonymous as the first one. I was confused. The roads looked identical to me. I had no idea how to identify our

campsite beyond familial recognition. I could almost hear my brothers complaining about the lack of manpower as they tried setting the tent and the large center pole. I sighed and started down the hill.

The first campsite came into view and yes, yes, the car looked familiar. The family should be four campsites up from there. But the campsites did not look familiar and my family wasn't where they were supposed to be. Heading back to the bathroom I came across a fork in the road that I had not noticed before but that was probably because I had been looking to my right to follow the campsite numbers. I soldiered on. And on.

A crunch of tires on the road brought my head up to find a dark green ranger pickup truck with park symbols on the doors making a slow, steady progress toward me. I flagged the park ranger down and explained my situation. He said, "Climb in. We'll find them." and we drove on. A short time later as I was certain we had seen all the campsites and my family was not to be found, we rounded a bend and there was the silver blue, easily holds eight, station wagon and my family at a picnic table with the tent fully set up and dinner being cooked on the campfire grill.

My father was quite polite and thanked the ranger for returning me. The ranger drove off. My father turned and looked intensely at me. "Where were you?" he demanded, "You've been gone over two hours!" His further questions illustrated his doubt and incredulity of my mental processes functioning. The bathroom was, it ended up, about 200 feet away. All I could offer was a meek, "I got lost."

You can recall as many details as you want when you are really looking back but the number of excuses does not change the outcome. And I have accepted the fact that of all the people you have or will ever meet I somehow doubt that anyone else will tell you they once got lost in a Men's Room.

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