

An American Icon

As I sat on a metal bench, shaded by an overhanging roof at a ride in Disneyland, I observed the wonderful kaleidoscope of humanity. I watched as several young parents proudly pushed their infants in strollers past the entranceway to the ride. Then there were elderly people and others with physical disabilities being escorted in wheelchairs. Every age was represented. I observed fair-skinned Scandinavians pass by as well as rich chocolate-skinned African-Americans and families from every Asian nation as they meandered along the walkways. Yes, in addition to Broadway and Kennedy Airport, this was a fantastic place to ‘people watch.’

Waiting for my loved ones to exit the ride at Disney’s Fantasyland, I had ample time to observe and ponder the lives of my fellow human beings. Unbeknownst to us, we had picked one of the park’s busiest days. It was the Thursday before Easter and Spring break, which enticed thousands to make their way to Florida.

People from all walks of life and all countries of the world, having saved religiously for months—maybe years—for this occasion, were fulfilling their “parental duty” by providing their off-spring with the life-time experience of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck land.

Why were there so few happy expressions? Where was the promised joy – the fulfillment of the ‘happiness’ ads? Instead of laughter and smiles, I saw harried, tired parents, exhausted toddlers—some with tear-stained faces—walking as if half-comatose. There was a strange atmosphere as I watched the never-ending line of bodies weaving a course along the ribboned mazes – back and forth – leading to their next event. I made the comparison to the long waits in our airports to get through security. Here, all we received for an hour’s wait was five minutes of entertainment.

A large, extremely over-weight man in his early forties sat across from me also observing the scene. He reached continuously for something edible out of a medium sized paper bag and sat – chewing – crunching – staring.

A young woman sat on the next bench for nearly half an hour watching over two strollers with sleeping children while others in her party made their way through the aisles for the brief ride awaiting them. Her countenance displayed only boredom. Her family and friends returned without comment. One of the fathers checked his colorful map and decided on the next hour’s wait for the *next* five minutes of ‘fun’ and they all moved on.

Eventually my family, consisting of my husband, son, daughter and three grandchildren returned, and we did what so many others do. We planned the next hike. We were determined to have fun. We had to. The cost demanded it!

The heat bounced from the pavements and the sun relentlessly reminded us of our physical discomfort. Our clothes clung to our bodies. Temperatures were soaring as our happy dispositions faltered. Our ten-year-old granddaughter was flushed and became faint from the heat. We found a fountain and splashed water over her brow and head and

found a patch of shade with a bench. Our son felt queasy and our older granddaughter took Tylenol for a headache. I was exhausted.

We managed to find lunch in a crowded family restaurant though the cacophony of voices drowned out any hope of conversation. As soon as we finished our expensive, but mediocre lunch, we found space alongside the curb where hundreds of other ticket holders were priming themselves for the Disney Parade.

Finally, the music came closer and we watched as high school bands from around the country led the way—marching in their heavy woolen uniforms in the 90-degree heat—perspiring and flushed. Dancers and characters out of storybooks and Disney movies danced along the roadway, flashing glued-on smiles and white teeth at the waiting crowds. What had sounded so glamorous to these young people before arriving, had become routine and monotonous.

We spent more money in the souvenir shops and then proceeded on our way down the main street. The masses of people began thinning down as the afternoon progressed. First it was barely noticeable, but then we could see some pavement under our feet and the air became fresher, as breezes cooled our tired bodies. Something magical was happening. It was as if Disney had turned on air conditioning.

Lights appeared all about us. The man-made lakes glimmered as God-made ducks sailed silently across the water forming dark banners as they skimmed across to the island surrounding the façade of the castle, which was suddenly highlighted by spot-lights.

Headaches and fatigue dissipated as cameras started clicking. Smiles, laughter and family jokes lightened the early evening and fond memories were being created.

Yes, our new generation had reached its right of passage. And in decades to come our grandchildren will tell of their wonderful adventures in Fantasyland when life temporarily became magical.