

Summer Vacation, Revisited

Written by Mark Shaffer

Tuesday, 08 June 2010 11:03



Editor's Note: Last summer, Mark Shaffer wrote this wonderful meditation on summer vacations... while on summer vacation. This summer, we offer it again for your reading pleasure, because Mark is on hiatus. (Actually, he's on summer vacation.)

Vacation used to be a luxury, but in today's world it has become a necessity.

- Author Unknown

Summer vacation. What sort of double-barreled shotgun blast of memories just flew through your brain with those two simple little words? My guess is that even as you begin to read this, hi octane nostalgia is already beginning to fire through the dusty synapses of those carefully stored, seldom-used recollections of hot days and tepid nights spent at the beach, the mountains or a lake – wherever the family fled each season to “get away from it all.” Theoretically. Summer Vacation. I feel both words deserve to be capitalized. Few things match the power of the senses they evoke: the sounds, tastes, scents, sights and sensations first encountered or habitually expected on these all-too-brief Great Escapes from school, work, home, responsibility and the day-to-day monotony of life. Have two words ever held so much promise, conjured so many possibilities, nurtured so many fantasies and set the imagination to spinning so quickly?

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And while your nostalgia levels continue to rev up old images and long forgotten senses, understand this: no vacation – regardless of how wildly successful you may have become in later life – no vacation will ever compare to those first experienced as a child, good or bad. I will forever associate Disney World with the smell of grease, oppressive heat, interminable lines and the creepy sense even as a seven year old, that Uncle Walt was out to rip me off with a gift shop at the end of every ride. Ice cream makes me think of a stand in long ago Myrtle Beach where my Dad would treat us kids to gloriously gargantuan cones of homemade chocolate, pistachio and strawberry on sticky June afternoons. And from a boyhood summer in Europe, I can still smell and taste the sweet, ripe melon purchased from a street vender in Rome. His wooden cart is still loaded with dark green orbs packed on ice. Some are split open to advertise the luscious red fruit. The worst heat wave in decades (114 degrees in the shade) grips the ancient city which smells of diesel fumes and baking bread, the constant drip, drip, drip of melting ice issues from a cart on every corner.

I have a very simple theory about this phenomenon, one that probably belongs to someone else and is pretty much just slightly distilled common sense, anyway. I'm a Late Boomer, having recently crossed the milestone of my fifth decade. As children, those of us lucky enough to go along on family vacations were completely open to the experience, free of the burdens of adulthood and absent of almost any sort of invasive personal technology. We had no notion of jobs, mortgages, insurance, 401K's, college



funds, politics, the horrors of dating or the value of a good mechanic. We didn't pay attention to the news, work out the household budget, haggle with car dealers or worry over life insurance. The closest thing to a cell phone or an iPod was Captain Kirk's communicator, "Cowboys and Indians" (and anything with toy guns) was still acceptable. As soon as school let out for the summer most of us shed our shoes and spent time indoors only because of our mothers' dogged insistence that we have regular meals and sleep under a roof (the exception being the occasional backyard tent expedition which always ended up with screaming kids in the middle of the night begging to come inside). And most importantly, summers meant a family trip – cramming the Country Squire to the roof and then packing more stuff on the roof, climbing into the backseat with my sister for what was surely to be the adventure of a lifetime. I was a born optimist.

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“Those that say you can’t take it with you never saw a car packed for a vacation trip.”

- Author Unknown

I am writing this on my own Summer Vacation, proof that in this fascinating modern world in which we live the concept of vacation continues to deteriorate. When I was a young boy (in the 1960’s) Summer Vacation initially came to mean The Beach. My parents – Dad a college professor and mom a high school teacher – had most of the summer off and for a number of years we bivouacked in a small rented house just off of Ocean Boulevard on the north end of Myrtle Beach. Sometimes we split the house with another family, friends of my folks from college. In those days people had the migratory tendency to return swallow-like to the same property year after year. It was like spending a month each year with temporary neighbors. The parents got together for cookouts and cocktails, we roved the beach and the Pavilion in packs, each season a little more changed.

It was during these first summer vacations that I became aware that my sister was, indeed, The Devil. Despite being younger, smaller and lighter she somehow managed to always engineer a trip to the emergency room for me. It was like vacationing with Damien. One minute everybody’s building sandcastles, the next thing you know there’s blood gushing from an open head wound. By the time I was ten, Grand Strand General had a gurney with my name on it marked “reserved.” These incidents weren’t actually my sister’s fault and to my relief and slight disappointment, she didn’t actually turn out to be the Anti-Christ but just a little quicker and better coordinated than me. She had the reflexes of an impala, which is why her other summer talent, falling into water, was so suspicious. For years on family outings if there was any hint of a body of water nearby – ocean, lake, river, stream, puddle or a large glass of water – she was going to be in it eventually. It was simply uncanny. To the best of my knowledge, it’s been years since this phenomenon has occurred.

“Babies don’t need a vacation but I still see them at the beach. I’ll go over to them and say, ‘What are you doing here, you’ve never worked a day in your life!’”

- Stephen Wright

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By the summer of 1968 our summer vacations had become rote. Like most of middle class America, we were comfortable in our familiar rut – perhaps even desperate to maintain it as the world around us seemed to be crumbling into chaos. That Spring as we began to look forward to the annual rituals of Sun Fun Week, Martin Luther King was shot down in Memphis and the world slipped a little further into darkness. Late on the night of June 5th, 1968 on the other side of the continent, Sirhan Sirhan shot Bobby Kennedy and nothing was ever the same. The next day in a little yellow beach house near the old Caravelle Hotel, we all huddled around a tiny black and white TV watching grainy reports of the assassination. Everyone cried. That was the last summer in the little yellow house near the Caravelle Hotel that I can recall.

“Vacation is what you take when you can't take what you've been taking any longer.”

- Author Unknown

The following year my Dad bought a 24-foot long Coachman travel trailer, hitched it up to the family station wagon and ushered in the age of RVing. This also ushered in the age of overheated engines, road side frustrations, campgrounds of various and sometimes dubious quality and clientele, nomad-like summers spent seeing as much of these United States as we could pack into a couple of months, and my own personal least favorite chore of all time: emptying the dump tank. This involved pretty much just what you think it did and was as revolting as you might suspect.

These trips were always well planned out in advance with many maps that required constant consulting – much like our trips today. The Old Man loves a map. My parents, both being educators, seemed to revel in the idea of continuing our education through these summer tours, an idea I was not enthusiastic about until I realized that battle fields, museums, monuments and old crumbly, creaky historic places and things were actually pretty cool. I was ahead of my time (thanks to my parents). The museums of the Smithsonian in Washington are still holy places for me. I turn right back into an 11-year-old each time I pass through the doors of the Air and Space Museum and the Museum of Natural History. And what young boy, raised on Robert Louis Stevenson and Jules Verne, would pass up a chance to board the U.S.S. Constitution in Boston Harbor? Stuff like this was mostly my Dad's influence. I recall my mother being more interested

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in exposing us to something called “culture” which, having grown up in Minnesota, she believed to consist mostly of classical music and anything by William Shakespeare. I have only vague memories of summer symphonies and such – a concert on the lawn at Wolftrap where I fell asleep in the cool grass – but my introduction to The Bard remains sharp. It was an extravagant production of King Lear at the annual Shakespeare Festival in Stratford Ontario (still going strong). I’m pretty sure this was the first time my Mother had encountered Lear, as well. Until this performance I’m certain the Shakespeare experience existed in her mind as some sort of exquisite enlightenment. She sure seemed surprised at all the gore and I vividly remember the horrified expression on her face when – in what I considered in my limited exposure as a brilliant execution of stage effects – Lear’s eyeballs shot across the stage in thick trails of blood during the blinding scene. I think one actually splattered into the lap of a woman on the front row. I was instantly impressed. Murder, betrayal, madness, torture, mayhem, blood and gore – the play had it all. I’ve been hooked on Shakespeare ever since. Thanks, Mom.

“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport.”

- Gloucester, King Lear Act 4, Scene 1

During the mid 1970’s the Big Summer Vacation gradually passed into family mythology. With high school the very character of the summer changed altogether. There were summer jobs (the end of childhood), cars, friends with cars, the confusing and dangerous rites of youth and, of course, girlfriends. The latter being the greatest influence on teenage summers known to man.

Growing up in the Pee Dee of South Carolina, the Grand Strand was convenient and somebody always seemed to have access to a house. The family vacations eventually ceased. My parents split, I went away to college and then to work and the term “vacation” took on new meaning. Suddenly vacations weren’t really about travel, or seeing something new, or even hanging out with friends. They were tiny allotments of escape – brief respites to a beach or a mountain for a week, two at the most, to try and relax enough to do nothing until it was time to return to doing whatever it was you actually did do.

The years passed and with them relationships, friendships, marriages, jobs, cities, towns and

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careers. Along the way something interesting happened. My Dad and I began to reconnect now and again for week-long expeditions to places like the Outer Banks, the Great Smokey Mountains and Vancouver Island in British Columbia (Dad isn't big on cities). And then in the early summer of 2001 as I was packing up an apartment in Las Vegas and preparing to embark unknowingly on a change of career, I was invited to tag along with Dad and a student protégé for an extended road trip through the West. I had no idea at the time – not the slightest inkling – that the Family Vacation was about to be reinvented. That student protégé's still in the car, a teacher with some extra time in the summer. We are traveling still – traveling now and together. The car is a little overloaded, Dad's still in charge of the maps and once in while someone gets a little testy (that would be me), and this year our band of gypsies has a new mammal...



But that is another story.

I was at the house of some friends recently who were discussing the upcoming vacation they were planning with their two young children. A brief argument broke out about whether the two dogs were going as well. The husband wanted to avoid any extra trouble (by this I mean he didn't want to spend his entire vacation chasing both kids and dogs), but the wife had the last word. "Hon," she said, "of course the dogs are going. This is a family vacation." His shoulders drooped a bit in resignation, visions of the mayhem to come flooding his imagination, no doubt. But my guess is years from now he'll look back on this time and smile at the image of those dogs with his children.

So turn off the cell phones, shove that PDA in a drawer and close the laptop. I'm about to do just that. After all, this is a family vacation, and from here on out the only job you have is to make memories. Get busy.