

King For Another Day: When It Reigns It Pours

Written by Jack Sparacino
Tuesday, 14 July 2015 12:51



Writing “King For a Day” a few months ago was great fun, followed by nice reader feedback. It prompted me to take a fresh look at more ways to shape a better world and refine them into a follow-up on our better angels . . . and angles.

Being king for any extended period is way too far above my pay grade and energy level to more than dream about. But I’d work for minimum wage to be king for just one more day. Here are a few decrees that top my list. Starting with those better angels...

Let’s allow everyone, when their time comes, to die in comfort and with dignity (except the *really* bad guys). I recently read historian David McCullough’s titanic book about how the Panama Canal was built (“The Path Between The Seas”: Simon and Schuster, 1977). Working conditions were miserable, the weather sickeningly tropical, and there were enough biting, disease carrying insects to allocate a troop of them to every grain of sand on earth:

“So swiftly were [yellow fever] patients dying, so desperate was the need for bed space, that in his final minutes of life, a dying man sometimes saw his own coffin brought in... For the sick who never made it to the hospital—for the vast majority, that is—the end was frequently more gruesome.”

Symptoms included “savage headaches” and severe pains in the back and legs. Improperly treated—the norm back then—patients could expect to vomit mouthfuls of dark blood and experience liver failure. *OMG*.

While trying to absorb these horrors, just from afar, I shared some related thoughts with my old friend Ken in New Mexico. He wrote back quickly: “As I read your email I am sitting in the nursing home here with my mother-in-law (93) who fell and broke her hip 9 days ago. She had

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surgery but is not recovering well. She is on hospice because she is not eating and is in rapid decline. She has dementia, so it would be better if she went sooner rather than later.” How many of us have endured similar experiences?

McCullough has also written eloquently about men agonizing from “the bends” (aka decompression sickness or caisson disease) with its essentially indescribable pain, in “The Great Bridge.” Fortunately, few of us ever face that transcendent misery. *But Americans continue to linger and die from a range of causes that are often excruciating*

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The top 10 causes of death in the United States in 2013, according to data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, look like this:

- Heart disease: 611,105 cases
- Cancer: 584,881
- Chronic lower respiratory diseases: 149,205
- Accidents: 130,557
- Stroke: 128,978
- Alzheimer's disease: 84,767
- Diabetes: 75,578

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- Influenza and pneumonia: 56,979

- Kidney disease: 47,112

- Suicide: 41,149

Absent proper pain management for these diseases, especially in their advanced stages, many patients suffer horribly.

And unnecessarily, given the available pain medications and technology. Here's the rub: we are humane enough as a society to make sure, in coordination with our vets, that our precious pets avoid unnecessary suffering and are routinely put down as painlessly as possible when further active treatment no longer makes sense. Most of us wouldn't *dream* of letting our beloved dog, cat, or horse undergo horrible pain when they lie beyond hope. And this decision is *never* made lightly when a responsible vet is closely involved.

So why do we so frequently allow human beings to suffer needlessly at the end of life? My decree is simple: we shall enact the necessary laws and *above board* medical practices to bring the end-stage treatment of humans at least to the level of our closest pets.

The Epiphany App. Get this. It happened to me a few weeks ago on our living room couch. According to vocabulary.com I had an *epiphany*, a "sudden revelation." Nothing major, mind you, like "when you realize that you're in the wrong line of work and you need to quit your job and join the circus." It was more mundane than that (thank heavens), more like a sudden realization that came out of the blue (actually the black, since this happened at night).

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These days my taste in music has run to big band classics from the likes of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman and standards like those recorded by Linda Ronstadt and Nelson Riddle. No, not elevator music. More like the sort of smooth sounds that make it easier to, well, daydream. The epiphany began with a few bars repeating themselves in my mind. It was a small jazz band playing something really funky. I started to smile. And wonder . . . What is that sound? Who are those guys? A song title flitted into mind, "Compared To What." Then nothing. Hmm, a dead end?

Of course not, at least not without checking with the nice people at Google. A quick search on that title brought me to a 1969 recording by Les McCann and Eddie Harris called "Swiss Movement." A few clicks later on Amazon and voila, a copy of the CD was soon in my mailbox. I played it again and again . . . it was fantastic. Checking in with my jazz expert friend Steve Provizer in Boston at WZBC 90.3 FM ("The Duplex Mystery Jazz Hour") confirmed that I'd fallen back into a real classic. The recording, live from the Montreux Jazz Festival in Switzerland, features the great Les McCann on piano, Eddie Harris, the early adaptor who introduced the electric saxophone (think Dr. Frankenstein meets the Wizard of Oz), and virtuoso expatriate Bennie Bailey on trumpet. I liked it when Steve, a fine trumpet player himself, rated Bailey's solo work as knockout good.

Seems I had actually *stumbled* into a fabulous musical experience. By accident. The app I'm looking for is fit for a king. It would facilitate a quicker journey from daydreamed thought or wish through to an elegant solution (no, not really like an online dating service but maybe a distant software cousin). Can we get the Silicon Valley people going on this right away? Beaufort High students? Battery Creek, Bluffton or Hilton Head? TCL? *Somebody???*

Whew. That's enough heavy lifting for me. I'm getting winded just thinking about this stuff. But how about just a half dozen more decrees, some quick and easy ones. Yes, here are the angles:

- **No more unresponsive, incompetent "customer service" departments.**
- **No more starting a sentence with "so" as a filler (like "um").**

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- **Election seasons will last no more than three months. Okay, six.**

- **There will be no more than five types of the following products as of 12/31/18: shampoo, toothpaste, deodorant, mustard, yogurt, and OTC allergy medicine.**

- **Juices must pour easily. Even adults should be able to open cartons kids' juice cartons without special help or tools. Or a kid.**

- **We need a new, fresher version of the "Happy Birthday" song for old timers.**

And finally... **No more little stickers on individual fruits and vegetables, especially tomatoes.** They're a nuisance to remove.

That's it, I'm exhausted. Un-king me, please.