
Wasting It

ONE EVENING LAST summer, I stood out on our deck with a group of friends. We had gathered to enjoy some great barbecue, the quiet of our mountain setting and the sublime enjoyment of watching night settle over us. The sky that evening was awesome. It seemed to be full of stars and the incredible variation of light that spoke of planets, nebulae and galaxies.

We stood there looking up, and none of us had words. The night sky is like that. It silences you with the magnitude of its mystery. Ojibway people have legends of the Star People who came once long ago to deliver the teachings, stories and ceremony meant to direct our lives. For a long while now, looking up at the sky has given me heart. So we stood in rapt silence, and then someone pointed to a speck of light moving eastward across the heavens.

It was the space station. As we watched it sail across the sky, I pondered how far we've come as a species. To see evidence of the human mind's potential looping around the planet was sublime. To think of that vehicle being launched into the sky to increase our understanding of the universe was wonderful.

Once the space station was gone, the night became a time for friendship, for conversation. There are entire universes in

each of us, and learning about them is endlessly fascinating. As Deb and I watched the last tail lights blink out of sight and the dark reclaim its dominance, I felt grateful that there will always be new and unfamiliar territories to explore.

When I heard about a Canadian billionaire spending \$35 million to become a tourist on the space station, it struck me as outrageous. Here was a man with riches galore, and all he could think to do with it was take a ride. Here on earth, \$35 million would change a lot of things. You could fill a lot of hungry bellies. You could put a roof over many people's heads. You could send deserving kids to university. You could bring water to parched countries. You could help create renewable energy.

Instead, when Guy Laliberté's ride was over, he landed on a planet where nothing had changed. The opportunities his money held had vanished. From space, the earth looks placid; it's only on the ground that you can see the turmoil we live in. From space, we are a shining blue marvel. On the ground, we are growing more and more desperate as time passes. But he had fun, and I guess that's all he thought about.

There are sufficient resources right here, right now, to change things. There always have been. That's been Creator's vision all along. There's enough raw material, creativity and money to keep our world safe, productive and nurturing. Billionaires in space change nothing. Wealth comes from other people, and there's a moral obligation to repay them.

We've allowed the media to fashion our images of success. Some years ago, I watched aghast as Ryan and Trista's wedding went prime time on a major U.S. network. They were regular people who had been made famous by reality television. When they married, the expense was horrendous—estimated at \$3.77 million. Later, Oprah gushed as Trista

told her about the half-million dollars she'd spent importing thirty thousand roses. Neither of them seemed to consider the effect that amount of money, if put to earnest work, could have had on the world at large.

There are those who might say, "Let them have their special day," or "That amount wouldn't really change anything." Those people need to know about Babs.

Babs was a chronic crack addict. She worked as a street prostitute to support her habit. She got old and broken down, and when Deb and I met her she was looking for a room, somewhere she could find sobriety and a new beginning. Once she'd settled into the rooming house and got some months of drug-free living under her belt, we hired her to do the cleaning there.

One day, Deb asked Babs, "If you had one dream that could come true for you, what would it be?" Without hesitation, Babs said that she'd always dreamed of going to Africa to work with starving children. She'd had that dream a long time, but she didn't know how to get started on making it real. All but a few of her teeth had rotted away as a result of her drug use, making it hard for her even to go to a job interview. She carried a lot of shame and hurt, and she was too embarrassed to smile in public.

We thought that dream was incredible for a person who had been down for such a long time. Babs impressed us with her honesty, and we wanted to find a way to help her. Neither of us had the money to pay for huge dental bills, and the agencies we spoke to had no measures to get those costs covered. Then one day, sitting in our dentist's chair, Deb mentioned Babs and her dream.

"I guess we'll have to get her smile back then, won't we?" That's what our dentist said. He offered his services, and we

approached the agencies again. But none of them could cover the costs even with a dentist on board.

When we got married, Babs was there to help us celebrate. She looked awesome in a mauve sun dress and heels. We'd asked people to give us a donation for Babs' dental work in lieu of a wedding gift, and by the end of the day we had collected \$645.

Two days later, our dentist called. He said he could cover everything but the lab costs for dentures, \$680. If we could come up with that amount, he said, he could start the work immediately. Deb and I were ecstatic. We paid the lab costs with the donated money, covering the balance out of our own pockets, and a week later Babs was in the chair. Two weeks after that, she greeted us in the hallway of the rooming house. She flashed a beaming, wonderful smile for the first time in decades.

What's all that got to do with billionaires in space? Everything. Exorbitant spending hurts. When Canada and British Columbia shelved out billions for the Winter Olympics, nothing changed. After sixteen days of vainglorious hosting, the world was still in the same condition. The potential in those billions of dollars disappeared. There is enough for everyone on this earth. There always was. When you gaze up at the sky on a starry night, that's what we need to remember.

Healing the Spirit

HEARING OF A suicide calls forth only silence at first. There's nothing you can say. Language vanishes into the void as the heavy punctuation of a life ended prematurely settles on your shoulders. A halt, a full sentence stop. An emptiness invades your spirit, and you understand clearly the nature of powerlessness.

Indians die at rates five to six times higher than the rest of the population. Among our youth, that translates to mean an incredibly high incidence of suicide. Our mortality rates at birth and from disease, violence and suicide have always been far greater than the norm. In the nation state at large, the prevalence of suicide among First Nations youth is a more pressing issue than any land claim, treaty negotiation or rights dilemma. It's far more important than payments aimed at allaying old hurts, and far more vital to our well-being. Native people don't need to die in such numbers. We need to live. But for many of us, life brings such soul-eroding despair that it's an arduous journey to continue.

I learned something of this as a kid. When I was adopted by a non-Native family and plucked from my northern life, I confronted swift and incomprehensible change. There were

