

The Artists Almanac

February 15, 2004

Travel

Samuel Johnson said happiness is not local.

We all promise ourselves, he went on, some longed for trip, once we finish this or that tedious work. We nod and add that, once we retire, we may do little else. The thrill of starting to some different place, with strange climates and customs, is so intense and broadening, we could do it all the time.

And yet, despite our yearning to escape everyday duties and our own stressed selves, we find these or other problems follow us as we take our vacations to those places pictured in the travel brochures. We sign up for a cruise with beautiful people to exotic climes and find ourselves at table with a manufacturer of gears for engines where we are treated to the details of his distribution plan or his record golf games. It rains, and our shore leaves are on the same clock we came to escape. We stand in groups and lines to visit crowded sites and restaurants. Then, on our return, frazzled from airports, exotic viruses, and living off the charity of strangers, we find our local problems, far from solving themselves, have conspired with each other, bred and multiplied. The crowded in-basket and clogged answering machine frown at us, unless we spoiled our trip by having it all forwarded. At least we have our slides to warm up our memories after our credit cards have cooled down.

There are other forms of travel.

One, ever more popular, is virtual travel. We can go via Internet or The Travel Channel to explore the surface of Mars, the coastal highway of California, the Temples of Japan or the Louvre, Turkey or the Left Bank of the Seine. Sight, sound, light and action: all but taste and smell are there. Even these may be sampled at every imaginable variety of local restaurants, where the natives may be seen and heard speaking the language. Walker Percy thought this might be done as well with books, with the added bonus of imagination. He called it a Rotation, said we all needed it, and thought the virtual variety was as good as the real. It is the theme of his hilarious novel, The Last Gentleman.

For some, there is an even better way.

Arizona Highways devoted an entire recent issue to visiting all fifty states, without once leaving Arizona. They carried it off. Using fogs, palm trees, conifer forests, seasonal marshes, blazing Autumn maples, the orange groves of the Valley of the Sun, the sere plains and cloudscapes of the Mogollon plateau, the ski slopes and lofty snowcaps of the sacred mountains of the Navajo, the rocky coasts and sandy beaches of Lake Powell and the lower Colorado River, they took us to the beaches of Hawaii, the Mississippi Delta, the Carolina low country, the Great Smoky Mountains, the ski slopes of New England,

the measureless forests of Minnesota, the rocky fog-shrouded coasts of Maine, the swamps and citrus groves of Louisiana and Florida, and the great prairies of Kansas and Wyoming, with distant views of mountains beyond.

And yet, our mind reminds us, we cannot all live in the splendor of Arizona.

Maybe not. But look around yourself, wherever you live. Here in Tennessee we have it all - mountains, forests, streams, lakes, abundant fish and wildlife, handsome cities, shaded town squares set off with picturesque old courthouses, gardens, produce markets, classical old homes, native bluegrass music, log cabins, every sort of tree, long views, and handsome people. All these pearls are strung on the necklace of a river the Indians once called Warioto, meaning "beautiful". We have in greatest abundance what Arizonans and people around the world cherish above all else – water. We have miles of lakeshore, several times the length of the entire Atlantic coast. Arizonans have an overworked descriptive term, riparian habitat. My friend Steve once surprised me with the observation that "out West what they treasure most are those rare areas which look most like Tennessee, where green trees cluster about running water." Each new day we get a different colored lens to view it through – a change of weather.

The estimable Doctor Johnson gives us a great truth: that we each find our happiness within ourselves, wherever we may be.

Everydayness dulls our appreciation of beauty: it is the Artist's job to surprise us with the riches we live amongst. We never quite saw the sparkle of water until Monet painted his Impression of Sunrise, and clouds, the only unaltered part of landscape entirely designed by God, took on new meaning for us after Constable painted them, without travelling more than three miles from home.

Bill