

Madison foursquare

42

This issue with a slightly enlarged type size, *Madison Foursquare* is brought to you by Scott Custis and Jeanne Gomoll, who live at 2825 Union Street, Madison, WI 53704.

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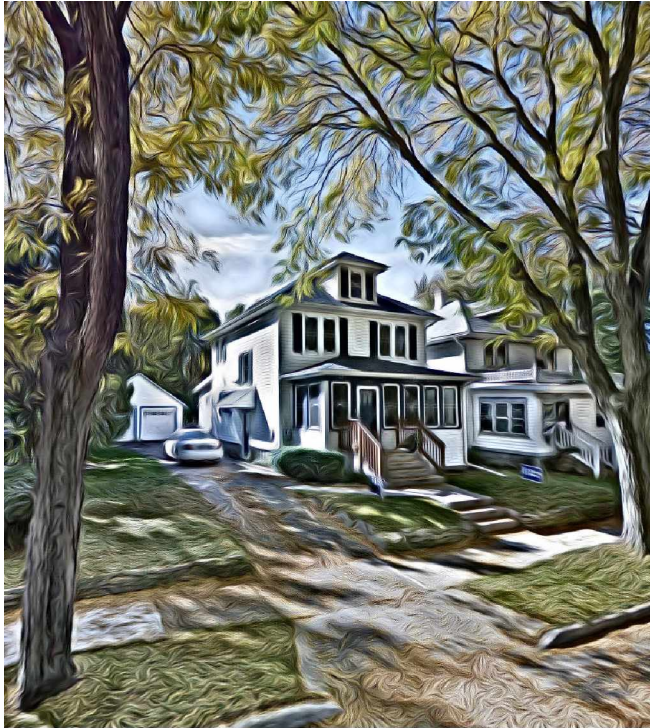
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This is *Madison Foursquare* #42, created using a Mac Pro with InDesign, Illustrator and Photoshop, all CC 2020, and printed on a Ricoh Aficio CL7200 color printer.

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Scott Custis [SC] and Jeanne Gomoll [JG]

April 2020 for *Turbo-Charged Party Animal* #406.



Turbo #404

Cover

[SC] It's a bit embarrassing to admit now that when Jeanne initially showed me her cover art for #404, I did not really like it. Even though she made it soon after DOJ Secretary Barr decided to investigate the FBI's Russia investigation, my reaction was "Bit grim, don't you think?" Luckily she didn't listen to me.

Lisa Freitag

[SC] Congratulations on the writing gig for *Twin Cities Geek*.

As Jeanne noted last month, we were both appalled at WisCon's continued bad treatment of you. Of course, WisCon has had to cancel this year, so Greg won't have to decide whether to battle the convention committee right away, and no one will notice that we'd decided not to attend. By next year, things could change.

Jim Hudson

[SC] Shortly after we heard that the New Zealand Worldcon was closing down, WisCon also cancelled. We are becoming used to the idea of a long summer here at home. We have refrained from making any travel plans for the near future, including to my hometown in Iowa. This must complicate plans for you guys to travel to Frederic as well?

[JG] It's now looking like Corflu 37 may have been the very last pre-virus SF convention and so far I've heard of no members who became ill in the weeks that followed. So, happily, there was no SF-convention Covid-19 hotspot. We were very lucky.

Carrie Root

[SC] I honestly don't know why I keep a book list, but I have for many years. I like looking back on what I've read sometimes and I'm sometimes surprised by what I find I've read that I'd forgotten. I'm a slow reader, but lately I've "zipped" through a few shorter things until the Stay At Home order really sank in. Now I've decided to tackle a project I'd put off until retirement, Neil Stephenson's *Baroque Cycle*. What have I done?

Marilyn Holt

[SC] Reply to your comment to me, *Murderbot* hit our SF Without Borders book club like a bomb. We snapped them up and all of us loved them. We had a very lively debate over whether the main character sounded more male or female to us. We are eagerly waiting for the next book. Congratulations also on the story sale.

[JG] The interesting thing to me about our book discussion debate was that the people who had listened to the audiobook (which was narrated by a man) all thought the main character felt more male (and frequently referred to them as "he"), while those of us who read the stories mostly thought of the main character felt more female (and frequently referred to them as "she").

Andy Hooper

[SC] When we were in Hawaii we came across a couple references to the mystery of how Polynesian explorers were able to find islands like Hawaii across vast stretches of ocean without instruments. The story seems to be that ancient Polynesian sailors used stars and other signs they observed in the ocean and sky to find land across vast distances. This skill of navigation was passed down from navigator to navigator, but has long since been lost. NOVA relates the story of Captain Cook in 1768 who took aboard a Tahitian navigator, Tupaia, who was able to guide Cook 300 miles to a small Polynesian island of Rurutu. Tupaia could also be relied on at anytime to point in the exact direction to Tahiti without the use of ship's charts. Tupaia died of malaria in the East Indies before Cook could try to learn his skill.

Cathy Gilligan

[SC] So sorry to read about the passing of your brother-in-law. It was a rather shocking way to find out.

Jae Leslie Adams

[SC] Regarding your comment to me, I like to ride down stretches of Tonyawatha Trail on my bike ride around Lake Monona. So many mansions looking out on the lake. I noticed that pretty much all season long you can count on seeing lots of landscape companies working at these properties, also on Farwell Dr. along Lake Mendota. Someone once told me that hiring a landscape company to fix up my little postage stamp yard was going to be expensive with maybe a long wait. I can see why. They keep busy servicing the rich. Do you know what issue of *Turbo* you published your essay on *Much Ado...* and *Unforgiven* was in? Or if you have an electronic version, could you send it to me? I am a fan of both stories and would like to read your piece sometime.



Hope Kiefer and Karl Hailman

[SC] I also want to echo Jeanne's thanks to you for hosting the Super Tuesday party. I had a fine time. I also want to echo encouragement from elsewhere to write up that trip report from last summer.

Turbo #405

Covers

[SC] Beautiful front and back hand-colored work, **Catie!**
[JG] Yes! Lovely work.

Greg Rihn

[SC] Re: doom, and I thought Jeanne's cover art for 404 was grim. Still, reading through 404 and 405, you are hardly alone in being a bit downcast, shall we say? I admit I've been somewhat fixated on the dark side of our future outlook lately, too. I wonder if at our age, we're inclined to focus on worst case scenarios simply because we have seen and lived through so much bad stuff already. I think I have had a sort of creeping dread of the future since about 1980.

You took us on another lovely tour of interesting activities. I saw a trailer for *Portrait of a Lady on Fire* that looked interesting to me. We will have to keep that one in mind now that you have vetted it for us.

[JG] There's so much wishful thinking woven through people's attitudes towards health issues. I remember after my brother Rick died of AIDS and his partner Danny survived, (and continues to survive, living with AIDS), lots of folks attributed Danny's health to his very positive attitude. I absolutely concur that Danny has a very positive attitude and hope that it helped him do

well, but for a while it was making me feel pretty shitty because the obvious corollary was that Rick failed to live because his attitude was bad. I guess I feel the same way about how people thank god for good things in their lives but seldom blame a supernatural being for the bad stuff. The suspension of disbelief allows way too many people to believe what they want to believe: that vaccinations cause autism and that the need for social distancing is a hoax.

I noticed that you carefully provided the date for all your excursions. It felt rather like a countdown, reminding us that you would soon have to restrict your reviews

to on-line events, take-out, and home cooking. I am expecting to see reviews from you for the National Theatre plays currently streaming, one week at a time starting Thursday night, for one week only, on YouTube. We have seen *One Man, Two Guvnors* and *Jane Eyre* so far. This weekend we will see *Treasure Island*. And the last play will be *Twelfth Night*. They've been wonderful.

Georgie Schnobrich

[SC] Thanks for worrying about us all, along with the best wishes, last month just as the real scope of the Covid 19 crisis was beginning to become clear.

It's nice to know that Jeanne and I and **Andy** and **Carrie** were not the only ones taking a risk to attend a convention that particular weekend in March. Geneva Steam Con sounded lovely and both you and **Greg's** program items sounded superb. I'd have liked to see them all.

[JG] As you no doubt know by now, American Players Theater schedule has been delayed and, who knows, may be entirely cancelled eventually. And WisCon has been cancelled too: as for their contingency fund (or as we used to call it, our "blizzard fund"), I do not know if the current con continued to nurture it. And even if they do still have a healthy fund, WisCon's contract with the Concourse hotel (signed 3 years in advance) includes some ENORMOUS cancellation penalties. I hope those penalties were waived as a result of the state shut-down orders, but if they were not waived, WisCon could very well go bankrupt.

We were thrilled by how the election turned out, in spite of the legislature and state supreme court's willingness to ask voters to choose their health over their votes. I keep having to stop myself saying, "It was worth it..." Because it was most definitely not worth it. I do hope though, that having gone through this experience, with the rest of the country and world witnessing it, that absentee voting will be the norm for everyone come November. Or maybe not. I Googled "martial law" the other day and found quite a few current references. We're not the only ones who are worried about this.

Thanks so much for your detailed response to my cover art!

Steven Vincent Johnson

[SC] Re: siege, although fear and depression are a reasonable and probably widespread reaction to the Corvid 19 crisis, my own feelings have tended more toward frustration and annoyance. Frustration with the daily reminders of the utter failure to deal coherently with the threat by the Trump Administration and annoyance at being stuck at home so much. I don't like being cooped up in our house for days on end. I have been getting out for walks (and, soon, bike rides) when the weather is tolerable, but I miss going to the theater, restaurants, shopping and hanging out in coffee houses. It rained this

past weekend and our car sat unused in the garage for four straight days, a record I think. I agree with the Stay at Home order and the closing of non-essential businesses as the Wisconsin infection numbers zoom past 1,000, but I'm not terrified of going out for necessary business so long as I take recommended precautions. I need to get out of here from time to time to keep my spirits up.

[JG] I think I'm less bothered by the necessity to stay at home than Scott. When I went into business in 2003 I noticed that I had no trouble at all with the isolation and in fact felt relief that I no longer had to deal with people dropping into my office to chat and, especially, that I no longer had to attend meetings. I discovered that I really, really liked working in my home office. I noticed that the phone didn't ring as often, yay! I tend to dive into projects and totally shut out the world around me (a skill learned in a small house with four siblings who made lots of noise). So, if anything, I am a tiny bit worried that eventually, (post-Covid 19 vaccine), it might turn out to be difficult for me to resume a more social life.

Lisa Freitag

[SC] What a dark, solemn, beautiful piece you shared with us. You did a lovely job of describing the mood of the pieces, which I am unfamiliar with. Bravo.

[JG] I searched on YouTube for some of the anime music you sited in your lovely piece, and listened as I read. I loved Miyazaki's music from *Laputa*. And I loved your fantasy. Thanks Lisa.

Carrie Root

[SC] I love that you have chosen to contribute to the apa! Jeanne and I were debating actually going to Corflu right up to the moment we left Madison on the wrong day, but we had a terrific time at the convention. Thanks for going out to BBQ with us, even though you had just had it the day before. The drive back to Madison was nicely uneventful. Since we did not get started back until 10AM on Monday, we only drove as far as Little Rock that day. We had periodic rain, but no storm. In the flatter parts of Arkansas we saw lots of standing water from the punishing rains the region had received so far this year. In Little Rock we stayed at a Hilton Garden, which was very nice. There was little evidence of the Covid 19 crisis around us at first. When we checked in, the lady at the desk made a reference to how "the government was messing with our business." Jeanne and I were momentarily taken back, but our room was fine.

For dinner we elected to get take-out from the drive thru at the Popeye's next to the motel. When we checked out the next morning, the complimentary breakfast buffet had transformed into table service by friendly gloved-up staff and a limited menu. No doubt "the government's" idea. That was okay with us. We left early and made it back to Madison by around 7 pm.

[JG] Thanks for the link to the Corflu videos! I just posted a note on the Corflu Facebook page and asked about the health of the 33 attendees. So far only one person reports that they came down with Covid-19 after the con—Pablo Vazquez, a Texas resident—and he says he suspects he caught it in Austin. He says he suffered with it for about three weeks, but that he's feeling far better now. I'm glad we avoided (in)fame as the "SciFi Hotspot."

Marilyn Holt

[SC] Your SF/fantasy novel sounds interesting. I like what you say about how you are handling the magic element. I have not read Louisa Morgan, I may ask some of the more knowledgeable fantasy fans in our book group about her. Best of luck with the project. I'll be looking forward to reading about how the process goes for you. You are very industrious and I have heard that is an essential element of eventual success.

I think you made an excellent deal with the wine source. I like wine but I don't have a very sophisticated palette and I have to fight a tendency to drink it like beer, not a good practice. Jeanne and I have very different preferences in wine. Jeanne drinks only a little more than **Cliff** does, a glass of wine or a single cocktail once in a matter of months. In restaurants lately she likes to try specialty drink options from the non-alcohol section of the drink menu. When she has wine, she likes hers to be quite sweet, and bubbles are good too. I like mine dry and crisp in a white, and full and fruity in a red. So we don't order bottles of wine to share in restaurants. The bottles we buy for home are usually used with guests. Once in a while if the two of us are having an Italian dinner at home, I will open a bottle of wine in the late afternoon and finish it by bedtime.

[JG] Mmmmm, Moscato!

Clifford Wind

[SC] Why do you regard Elaine Willman as a conservative? Most Native Americans do not strike me as being fond of the right-wind agenda. I see she lived and worked in Wisconsin for a while. Her book titles sound reasonable. I did not see a Wikipedia entry for her, or

reviews for her book online.

[JG] It's hard to understand why Scott didn't include an anecdote about his own accordion-related misspent youth in reply to your comments about *Death by Accordion*. He should certainly look into joining the Closet Accordion Players of America, in my opinion.

Andy Hooper

[SC] It was delightful to see you and **Carrie** at Corflu. Your play was the clear program highlight for me. I have seen John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* only once many, many years ago so I had only the sketchiest idea of what the story was, it was fun to rediscover it through your inspired and funny reworking ably assisted by an enthusiastic cast.

I had the pleasure of joining Tommy Ferguson, Gary Mattingly and Spike for the Friday afternoon wine tour. Since John Purcell organized the tour but could not go, the vacuum in leadership was filled by Spike. Spike was in fine form, funny, skeptical, wise and knowledgeable. Tommy was a real hoot. Gary and I made an attentive audience (and maybe quiet enablers) for Tommy and Spike. The tasting afterwards was a delicious blur. I bought some wine and brought it home to remind me of a fine time had by all.

[JG] Great con report, Andy. And thank you for your write-up of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* in *Flag #22*.

Re your comment about the *other* Steve Johnson who used to live on Brooks Street in Madison... I met that Steve some time before I knew **Steven Vincent Johnson**. Steve "no-V" Johnson wrote a very long letter of comment in response to *Janus #1*, with some very useful layout and design advice, in addition to explaining things about letters of comment to a very neo fan. We became friends and went out together for a while before he moved out of town. But he never attended any of the group's weekly meetings and so I suspect that he may never have met Steve Vincent Johnson. As far as I know, he was mostly content to write LoCs to *Janus* and go to the occasional movie with me.

What a great, funny speech from Terry Carr. Thanks for that.

Jim and Ruth Nichols

[SC] Ruth, I liked your essay very much, especially the sly humor in the last paragraphs. You and your "misery guts" were hardly alone in this and the last apa. Everyone is trying to cope as best we can. It seems to me that having a dementia scare is a rough path to take to end up with a

working weight loss plan, but I guess you can see it as a positive outcome. I hope you never go through that again.

Jim, I guess the best you can say about your work at home is at least the money is coming in and you don't have to deal with the stress of a layoff and the uncertainty of unemployment compensation. I feel for you. I know how it feels to be stuck doing something boring and repetitive day after day, but the alternative is kinda awful. Hang in there, retirement is coming.

[JG] It has been scary. The YMCA is closed down and I've had to give up swimming (that's the worst thing for me), so we go on walks every day. Walking on the sidewalk, swerving onto the grass to put as much space as possible between us and on-coming pedestrians. Or crossing the street to avoid them entirely. Everyone is dangerous. Wearing a mask and gloves into the grocery store (Willy Street is my favorite store: I think they're doing the best of all the stores in keeping everyone, customers and staff, safe). I wonder if wearing a mask will be like wearing a bike helmet: after a while, I felt very uncomfortable, incomplete, if I got on a bike without the helmet. Will that happen with face masks? Will I ever feel comfortable without a mask in a crowd of people?

I've heard people complain about the mind-muddying effects of Benadryl. I hope getting off that clears your mind of forgetfulness and worries.

Jim, I'm glad the city is allowing you to work from home. We are wondering how other city and state workers are managing this. When I worked at the DNR, it was pretty clear that the State of Wisconsin did Not Like the idea of people working outside the office.

Beautiful Hawaiian picture! Thanks!

Joe Leslie Adams

[SC] I loved "Party in your PPE."

You mentioned the people running and walking on the bike path. I have seen them too. The other day I took a long walk on city sidewalks. I encountered few other people except a couple dog walkers. Near the end of my trip I turned down Fair Oaks Avenue at the Atwood intersection and soon I could look down the sidewalk all the way to Milwaukee Street. Not another soul was on the sidewalk. Halfway down I crossed the bike path. Looking left and right, it was almost crowded with folks jogging and walking. I must keep this trend in mind when I get my bike out.

[JG] Speaking of sidewalks, I snapped a photo of the work of a newbie sidewalk artist for you. I am torn between captioning the art as an apocryphal "early Adams work," or using it to plead that you take some



walks in our neighborhood and (in Scott's words) "class up the joint."

Like you, we also continue to be addicted to MSNBC. I nod approvingly whenever powerful people commend Rachel Maddow for her excellent reporting. And I worry about her's and Chris Hayes' health (and for their amazing staffs).

Jim Hudson and Diane Martin

[SC] Jim, is it too soon to say that you are doing a terrific job as OE?

I don't see us dumping DirecTV anytime soon, but I am reading about your transition away from cable with interest. Please keep us posted how it goes. We enjoyed the first season of *Picard*. I'm personally giving a lot of credit to one of my favorite authors, Michael Chabon, for that. We are still watching *The Walking Dead* and *Fear of the Walking Dead* which I don't think is yours and Diane's cup o' tea, but I feel our attachment to it beginning to fray. We're casting around for new stuff, so keep the suggestions coming.

[JG] Oh no! You will be giving up one of the only two telephone numbers I can remember without looking up (except for my own)! Before my folks died I also remembered their number, but that's gone now. I don't even have Scott's number committed to memory. The

other number I remember is the one that my family had when I was a teenager. I can't tell you why that sticks in my mind or why Diane's 233-0326 has stuck with me all though the years. It's a mystery. But if you wondered, that may explain why I am one of the few people who continue to call that number. It will be a sad day for me when it goes away. Well, it will come in handy for some future on-line password I suppose.

I just finished binge-watching ALL 16 SEASONS of *Grey's Anatomy*. I started watching it mainly as something to do while I was riding my recumbent stationary bike, but got hooked, and started watching it...more often. I think this has something to do with my tendency to want to FINISH things. I mean, this compulsion has been useful while working on a project: my tunnel vision means that I tend to focus on the thing at hand and ignore all distractions and keep going. I get it done! Scott will testify that I've irritated him a few times when we've worked together on a task that he may have envisioned as a several-day or week-long project, and once we get started, and the hours pass and it gets dark, I start saying, "let's just FINISH it now! Let's keep going!" I think this obsession with *Grey's Anatomy* connects a bit with my compulsion to finish, but it may also be my own personal Corona virus coping method. It's a well-written series. I like a lot of the characters quite a bit, and have been much entertained by some of their arcs. I have found the alternate family arrangements inspiring. I cheer for the admirable women characters who do not want to be mothers and for the race-blind casting. All excellent things. But holy shit, there were a lot of episodes. I haven't actually allowed myself to add them up; but most seasons had 24 episodes. Just don't tell me what number you come up with, OK? But I am free now. And would sort of like to talk to someone about the show, but I think most of the conversations I would like to join happened many years ago. Like, why did that icicle that stabbed Dr. Christina Yang's torso stay solid and threaten her life for such a Very Long Time? Yeah, I understand it was probably meant to be a metaphor, but didn't the screenwriters realize that it would have melted??!! Anyway, I am free now. It will be months if not a year before new episodes come out, so I can move on....

What's New

[SC] We have been having few new adventures in this time of "sheltering at home." I have taken my first couple bike rides of the season on days when the temperature reached the 50s. Though I have continued to take walks and do time on my elliptical machine, I don't tend to



work all the same muscles I use on a bike, so my first ride around Lake Monona was modest in length and slow, and it still wore me out. Better the second time. One big lesson I've learned in the age of Covid 19 is that the bike path might not be the best way to get around on a bike. The bike paths now are very popular at all times of the day with walkers, runners, dog-walkers (and one cat walker, so far), moms or dads with prams, skateboarders and, of course, bikers. The streets are actually quieter and roomier. Since many Madison streets are well marked for bikes, I think I will spend more time riding in the road.

Speaking of cars, we noticed the price of gasoline dropped to under \$1.00/gal. for the first time since, I think, about 1980. The Russians and Saudi's have reportedly signed a pact to reduce production, but the news says that their agreement will fall far short of affecting the drop in demand, so we may not see much of a rise in price for a while. I last gassed up our car on March 31 and as of this writing (April 17) we have used only 1/8 of a tank, so I will not be rushing out to take advantage of the cheaper gas. On the other hand our auto insurer recently announced some sort of price reduction or refund on our car insurance in light of everyone's reduced driving (hence fewer accidents.) There were few specifics. We'll see what that turns into.

After we got back to Madison from Corflu, we indulged in a bit of grocery stocking up. We filled up our basement freezer and pantry and laid in a few dry goods in plastic bins in case we are asked to not go out at all for a couple of weeks. Of course our kitchen refrigerator/freezer has also been kept mostly full so I panicked one Sunday morning when I opened the fridge to discover the temperature had climbed overnight to 60°F. I knew the power was not a problem because the refrigerator light came on when I opened the door. I checked the temperature switch on the back wall of the fridge and it was set, but turning it to colder did not cause the

compressor to kick in. My first thought was something had gone wrong with the motor. I called upstairs to Jeanne. She immediately started making telephone calls to see if someone could come over to look at it, but it was unlikely on a Sunday, and my first guess was if the motor had died, we would have to replace the whole fridge, unlikely on a Sunday. I quickly ran down to the basement to get our coolers and what ice packs we had in the basement freezer and began emptying the fridge. Jeanne came downstairs and pitched in after leaving messages with a couple likely businesses. Our refrigerator has the freezer section as a drawer in the bottom instead of the top or side of the unit. The freezer was much fuller than we usually keep it. It was when I was reaching down and back to clear out the top shelf that I noticed a white dial on the ceiling of the freezer about the size of my hand. The dial said “OFF.” That dial controls the whole refrigerator. We probably set it at the recommended “4” setting when we bought it more than ten years ago and promptly forgot it existed. When we were filling the freezer with extra stuff, we must have accidentally pushed the dial to the off setting. Once reset, the machine worked fine. Good to know. Good to remember. But that was all the excitement we needed for one day.

[JG] A little postscript to the refrigerator story: I did find a local repair person through Angie’s List, who was willing to come out the very next day to look at our fridge. I let him know that it turned out we didn’t need

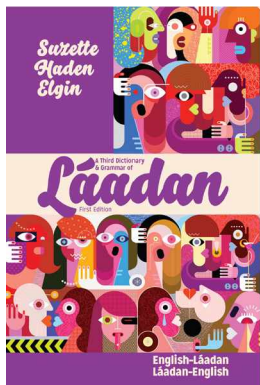
him but thanked him profusely for his advice and willingness to make a house call.

I think I’ve mentioned most of my personal “news” within comments to you all since that mostly consists of how we are dealing with stay-at-home and social distancing rules. I’ve continued to work on the *Láadan Dictionary* project with Diane.

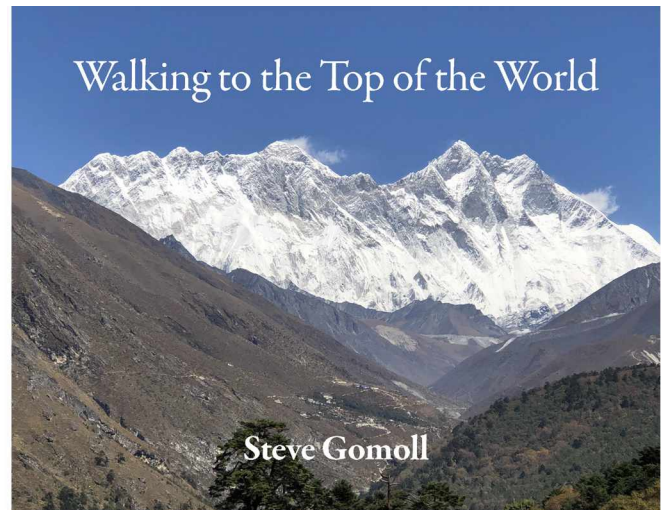
I thought we’d have been done

by now, but a Láadan scholar, Amberwind Barnett, has given us a lot of invaluable help correcting and finalizing the book, for which Diane and I are very grateful. The dictionary will have 334 pages and we are really and truly almost done. It’s quite possible that the book will be done by the time you hold this apa in your hands. Yay! Getting it done, one of my favorite things. I’ll include a link in the next issue of *Foursquare*.

Scott and I are almost finished with his family’s photo project. Scott had all the photos scanned by The Camera Company. I am almost through with the job



of correcting the images in Photoshop. I’ve printed the photos that his sister Bonnie chose onto good photo paper. In the next couple days I will save all the electronic files—the original scans, the corrected images, pdfs and caption list—onto a couple thumb drives, one for Scott and one for his brother Jon. Scott has returned all the photos into their original spots in a stack of photo albums, and will give them to Jon. Thus we have solved the problem—which caused some bit of emotional tumult among Scott’s family—as to who gets



which photos. EVERYONE gets as many and whichever photos they want, in whatever format they want. Yay!

After which I moved on to my brother’s photo book for his 15-day trip up and back from Mt Everest Base Camp. I planned to work on this earlier...but. *Grey’s Anatomy*. How embarrassing. The layout, so far, includes days 1-7 of his 15-day trip and is already 100 pages long. Whoosh.

After that I can FINALLY return to my project of collecting my own writing and artwork for a memoir. Here’s a story from the vault, chosen because Georgie recalled my long-ago use of the phrase, “You Could Die!”

From the Vault

Be Careful! (You Could Die!)

First published in *Whimsey 4*, 1985

It was a beautiful Fall day. Scott and I were hiking the steep path up the eastern bluff of Devil’s Lake. Changing leaf colors created a brilliant patchwork of oranges, yellows, reds, greens, and browns on the opposite bluff across the lake, and reflected another brighter tapestry upon the lake’s surface.

Sun shown down through a yellow canopy, plunging trunks and branches into dramatic silhouetted relief. Tumbled quartzite boulders which glowed with wonderfully subtle hues of pinks and grayish pinks guarded our path, and built the steps over which we clambered. The air was crisp and cool.

Behind us hiked a family that was enjoying their climb with a raucous enthusiasm that could be heard from quite a distance.

“Mom, watch this! I’m flying!”

“Be careful, Billy!!”

“Where’s Tom?!! Oh, my God, where’s Tom? Did he fall?”

“Ed, will you please stop joking like that?”

Billy get away from that ledge! Be careful!”

“Hey Dad, can we lay down here and hang our heads over the crevasse and watch the rock climbers?”

“Be careful!”

“Be careful!”

“Wow, look at that rock bounce!”

The rock fell into a puddle below the kids and splashed mud all over Scott’s jeans.

“Be careful! What if you had hit that man with the rock?”

“I’ll race you to the next ledge!”

“Slow down and be careful!”

We slowed down our own pace at that point and drifted out of earshot as the family passed us and went on ahead. A bizarre, bureaucratic fantasy flickered through my mind...

The University psychology department is conducting an intensive study into the efficacy of reminding people to “take care.” A sample of 200 subjects will be accompanied by a guardian 24 hours a day for one month and reminded by their guardians to “be careful” at every appropriate opportunity. A control group will be allowed to conduct normal lives for one month without any special cautionary warnings. At the end of the month these subjects will be surveyed to determine whether either group has sustained a higher accident rate or whether either group has formed any measurably different attitude toward their personal safety.

We’ve learned to ignore those parental “Be carefuls” too well...

It’s amazing how most people behave when they visit government-owned parks and forests. Many people seem to think that federal or state maintenance

implies an entirely tamed wilderness. As if a picnic bench means the park is like a dining room. As if a path implies that all the trees and plants along it are like their hallway walls back home—harmless and of little interest. As if the animals living in the parks are like pets and can be touched, fed or abused at will. As if the spectacular sights for which the park was created in the first place have been converted into government-inspected guaranteed-safe, public concessions: operating on schedule with all sharp corners, poisonous substances and exploding tendencies thoughtfully removed.

At Yellowstone National Forest, the signs that warn people to stay away from “Old Faithful” and the other hot steam vents are regularly ignored. Every season, tourists walk blithely across the hot springs’ deposits (which are dangerously thin in spots), and peer down the holes, looking for the mechanism of the hot steam explosions. Every season, despite the signs, there are injuries and fatalities because people ignore the signs that warn of hellish steam temperatures.

Gardner Dozois has often told the story of his work as a safety officer in the Army. “Be careful!” wasn’t enough. He resorted to the phrase, “You could diiiiie!!” in his memos (because people had).

“Do not touch or feed the buffalos,” say the signs. Yet, every year at Yellowstone a dozen or so tourists are gored because the placidly grazing buffalos reminded them of the cows back on the farm.

At Devil’s Lake State Park there is a sign that reads “Do not drag picnic benches into the lake.”

Maybe it’s just that people don’t understand the philosophy of parks. Maybe the metaphor of amusement park has replaced the idea of conservancy in people’s minds. They’ve forgotten the history and purposes of the park systems. National forests aren’t considered by them (and maybe not by the current administration) to be preserves of—often dangerous—wilderness areas. They are seen, instead, as some exotic sort of playground, with “rides” and exhibits and shows—with everything arranged primarily as tourist entertainment, safe and universally accessible.

Maybe there should be a psychological study done to discover the effect that signs and brochures published by forests and parks administrators have on tourists visiting these places. I wish it weren’t so, but I rather suspect that reminders about the potential dangers in the wilderness are as effective as a chorus of parental “Be carefuls!”

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