

Nov. 1, 2015

## Encountering creation while on vacation

It was an October morning. I woke up feeling like a science experiment gone terribly awry. My eyes were burning and my throat was so scratchy that I felt like a human wood chipper.

This was the first day of our vacation, so I had little choice but to embrace my inner Chuck Norris. I would have to be strong. I would have to be tough. I would have to stop crying. A few hours later my wife and I left for Arkansas. I managed to keep my tired eyes open for the entire drive, knowing that we were headed to Ozark mountain country unhindered by throngs of people—a land filled with tree-covered hills, where I would be allowed a good respite.

It was then that I learned for the upteenth time that it's when we are at our most helpless that we most feel the very real embrace of our loving Lord. As more and more miles separated me from home and bed, I prayed that the Lord would allow me to make this journey without my turning into a goober-hacking snot monster.

We arrived in Bentonville that evening. But ... but something was amiss! Where was the quiet countryside? Long lines of traffic crept for miles along both major and minor thoroughfares like snails to the salt mines. I had an ominous thought about hotel accommodations. We never like to call ahead for rooms. It ruins the spontaneity.

We pulled up to a hotel. My body felt like an old suitcase filled with rubble. I requested a dolly so that my wife could wheel me into the hotel.

"I'm sorry," the desk-person told us, "we've been booked six weeks in advance for the War Eagle Mill Fall Arts and Crafts Show. Everything's filled up, what with 100,000 visitors in the area."

"100,000 crafters?!" I screeched, my voice dramatically enhanced by my cold. "How many doilies, home-made jewelry, and paintings of John Wayne can you fit into one craft show?"

My wife tapped me on the shoulder. Standing behind us were several angry older women with crates and oversized suitcases. One held a leather-craft chisel that she twirled menacingly between her fingers. Another wore knitting needles in a specially designed holster. I had to think fast. I grabbed my wallet and pulled out a baby picture (whose baby picture, I don't know) that I keep for just such occasions. I flung it at them. They went for it like trout to a lure, wooing over the "precious child" in the photo, allowing my wife and me to make our escape.

Turns out the craft show wasn't just here, but across the *entire region*. We called a hotel several miles outside of town that by some miracle had a vacancy. (We decided that spontaneity is good, as long as you have a place to sleep while you're thinking about how spontaneous you are.) As we made our way to the hotel amid the traffic, I was honked at twice "just because I'm an out-of-state driver," I angrily told my wife as I accidentally drove across someone's lawn.

I was as tired and stressed out as I've probably ever been. When the clerk at the second hotel handed us our precious room keys, I hugged him and began to weep. He patted me on the back, telling me it would be okay. I burped and thanked him.

Tired, stressed, and hungry, we went quickly to the closest restaurant. The entire place was lit by single, tiny teacup candles on the tables. I ate half my dinner before I realized that instead of sitting with my wife, I was with Ed Bernstein, a wood-carver from Bellevue, Wisconsin. My wife sat by herself sharing dinner conversation with the faintly-lit silhouette of a tall-backed chair.

For a mere \$65, including tip (yes, this is sadly true), we enjoyed one pork chop, two crab cakes, two cups of coffee and dessert. Now I was stressed, our budget drastically altered, and my head felt like the inside of an old shoe. I managed to sleep through the night, although my cold caused me to snore. When I woke up, I found that my wife had crawled between the mattress and the box springs.

Having focused my prayers and thoughts of God's presence entirely on my own personal well-being the previous day, I was pleasantly reminded of His majesty while touring the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville.

On this, the first full day away, I managed to almost forget my cold. The museum featured a gallery of the art of Alfred Maurer, whose early work is indescribably beautiful. *Here was the hand of God at work*, I thought as I studied the color, the incredible and delicate portrayal of character. I saw in his paintings images mirroring the reality of God's creation – the beauty found in real people all around us. Maurer reflected God's majestic love for His creation. What an incredible gift to be able to look upon Maurer's actual paintings.

Later, at 36, he switched to the fauvist style. (If you wonder what the fauvist style looks like, pull out some of your first grader's art class creations. Now imagine they painted them with their feet while blindfolded.)

We later visited the Native American Indian Museum where my wife purchased a "turtle clan" bracelet for me, seeing as her ancestry is of the Delaware Indian turtle clan. We also visited the Pea Ridge Civil War battle site, which was equal parts fascinating and sad. It was the bloody battle that helped decide the war for the Union.

We arrived home on a Sunday at 2:45 p.m. I raced to the cathedral to cover the 3 p.m. Wedding Anniversary Mass.

*God's an awesome portrait artist*, I thought as I focused my lens. I realized then that you don't need to go to an art museum to experience the incredible beauty of God's creation, it's found in real people all around us. If you want proof, just look in the mirror. *A masterpiece!*