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Queen Anne Hill - Seattle, Washington

Sunday, the 15h day of July 2012

Chilly, windy, wet - 63 degrees at noon

## THE BEAT GOES ON

On Saturday evening I marched into my house playing big brass cymbals.

*CLASH CLANG CLASH CLANG!*

My wife was delighted.

My neighbors, up whose driveway I had marched, were not.

They had been sitting quietly on their porch drinking wine in the still of a summer's eve and did not see me coming.

*What the hell?*

But they understood . . . more or less.

They knew I had gone to Portland for my first marching band practice.

But they thought I was only going to be playing tambourine, not cymbals.

"There's good news and bad news," I said to my wife.

"I've been promoted to play cymbals . . . but I'm going to need a wig."

"You don't need a wig to play cymbals."

"Well, there's more - I've been made an honorary majorette and that means I need a short purple skirt and sequined underpants."

"Majorettes don't play cymbals," she said.

"Well, this one does," I replied.

*CLASH CLANG CLASH CLANG . . .*

In truth I'll wear the same uniform as the rest of the band.

My white bunny suit would be too hot for a 2-mile parade march in summer.

Also, in truth, I will play cymbals, not tambourine.

I even have a cymbal solo.

Yes.

Well, so it's just one big CLANGING-CRASH at the beginning of a tune called "We're An American Band," right after the drum roll.

But it had better be on the mark or the band will fall out laughing.

They would be amused, not annoyed.

That tells you a lot about the spirit of the band.

The BGOMB is truly a real deal, big time band organization.

The roster includes 20 flag wavers, 10 color guards, 12 dancers, 30 twirlers, 100 instruments, plus water carriers and camp followers.

A couple of hundred people.

And now, me, Captain Kindergarten, rookie cymbals man.

Being backstage in the life of a band was a revelation.

On parade they sound and look like a quality marching band.

Good enough that you don't really notice they aren't in high school anymore until you take a second look at them as they go by.

But if I took the band in their rehearsal clothes without their instruments to a mall or a big-box shopping store and asked them to scatter, and then tell you there were 180 members of a marching band close by - majorettes, dancers, flag wavers, color guard and full corps of instrument players, and say, "Pick them out," you couldn't even begin to do it.

In civilian clothes they look like an all-American middle-class, middle-aged, random selection of their species - mostly grey-haired or balding, wearing the suburban uniform of our day - jeans or shorts, flip flops or sports shoe, T-shirts, baseball hats (and those are the women) - but the men don't actually look or dress that much different.

Tall and thin, wide and short, smooth and lumpy, parents and grandparents. Some look like renegades from a nursing home; some like they're recovering from terminal yoga; some like eager cruise passengers; some like casino slot-machine addicts; some like Sunday School teachers; some like organizers of a Lion's Club picnic; some like your aunts and uncles who always come to a family occasion and stay to do the dishes; some like frazzled housewives with a long list on a shopping day, accompanied by their bring-along husbands with long faces, who had rather be watching ball.

I could go on - knowing they will recognize the teasing of affection for people I like.

But my point is this: they don't look special or different.

From the outside.

What counts is what's inside.

What's essential is invisible to the eye.

They contain the sound of music and the power of foolish joy.

They have the juice.

I sat through their rehearsal, and they *played* - in the sense of performing together well on instruments - in the sense of having a rollicking good time. And even my CLANGING got better as the rehearsal went on.

*I can do this . . . I thought - and if they thought it was a lot of trouble to get in touch with me and invite me, wait until they try to get rid of me . . .*

After the Seattle parade tunes were nailed, the dancers and flag wavers and twirlers showed up to rehearse with the band.

What was that like, you ask?

Just imagine the first 30 women you saw in a supermarket would suddenly break out into a syncopated, synchronized, choreographed routine and dance down the aisles.

Led by their star, Marcy Tuffli, who is 80.

I don't mind telling you I had tears in my eyes as I watched the dancers.

The years and the body shapes of the ladies fell away and something quite beautiful appeared - the young women they once were and always will be, setting an example about being fully alive as long as life goes on.

The ladies made me an honorary member of their troop, which is why I need the grey wig and short purple skirt and sequined underpants - and a baton, of course - and twirling lesson, too. (I tried it - it's not easy.)

(Well, maybe not . . .)

The dancers and twirlers are the real deal.

And so is the rest of the band - the real deal.

They know how to play - and live.

Their beat goes on.

And they didn't just politely indulge me, which was all I had hoped for.

No, they scooped me up in their good will, gave me a set of cymbals, and put me to work.

As my neighbors will soon learn, I'll be practicing all week - marching up and down the driveway:

1,2,3,4 - left/right/left/right, CLANG CLASH CLANG CLASH.

Prepping for my coming out - July 28<sup>th</sup> - Seafair Parade, Seattle.

And that will not be the end of the story.

I'll likely march in the Pendleton Rodeo Parade in Oregon in September.

And . . . then . . .

"What are you doing January 20<sup>th</sup> next year," asked the director.

"Nothing, why?"

"How would you like to march with us in the President's Inaugural Parade in Washington."

I almost fell off my chair.

Of course.

Driving down to Portland Saturday morning I thought the most I would have to report was a one-shot guest appearance at a band rehearsal.

Just that much would have been enough.

But I had under-estimated the empathy and open-heartedness waiting for me.

All my life I have wanted to be a member of a marching band.

And now I am.

The story continues.

The beat goes on . . .