

JOURNAL / ESSAYS / NEW STORIES – No. 3056

Queen Anne Hill - Seattle, Washington

Written Sunday, the 29th day of July 2012

Clear, warm, evening breeze - 78 degrees at 6:00 p.m.

MARCHING BAND TRUTHS

And so it finally came to pass . . .

Captain Kindergarten's dream of being in a marching band became reality.

On Saturday night 300,000 people lining the Seafair Parade route in downtown Seattle were unaware witnesses to the debut of Flashpan Fulghum, rooky cymbal player in The Beat Goes On Marching Band.

Despite my anxieties when I went to Portland for band rehearsal two weeks before, my fears had been allayed by the practice session. Sitting down in a chair, chiming in as parts of the band tunes were rehearsed, being promoted to cymbals from tambourines, and being treated with tolerant kindness by the easy-going director and the accommodating fellow band members who labeled me their "imbedded journalist."

All this gave me confidence.

I remember driving home thinking, *How hard can this be?*

Now I have the answer: Hard!

First big truth:

Watching a parade and being in the parade are not the same experience.

Being onstage and being a spectator are different realities.

You move encapsulated in your unit, oblivious to the rest of the parade.

If you are in the parade, you don't see the parade.

A second big truth:

Being in a parade involves as much waiting-to-march as marching.

And the waiting around allows anxiety and adrenaline to accumulate.

We mustered at 6, slowly moved forward, stopping and starting, finally slotted in at 76<sup>th</sup> place at 8, and walked off into the quiet darkness at 10.

That's a four-hour gig.

A third big truth:

Marching in a parade means both multi-tasking and multi-synchronizing.

You must do your part while being fully connected to the rest of the band. You must always keep cadence - *left, right, left, right* - no matter if the band is standing still, moving slowly, or going full speed ahead. *Left right left right* - the beat goes on - even if you fall down, you do it in cadence.

At the same time you must maintain line with the players on either side of you, and with the players ahead of you.

Furthermore you must be prepared for what happens to the lines when the band turns corners.

And, at the same time, be connected to signals from the leader as to what tune will be played next.

And you must play only your part as written for each tune.

All instruments for example, don't play non-stop and don't always play at the same volume.

This is especially true for the cymbals.

Even more so if you are the *only* cymbal player.

A poorly timed CLANG/CLASH will be noticed.

But here I was, in uniform, about to walk off into a long tunnel of lights and sounds and human beings stretching away for two miles.

All of these standard marching band protocols were completely new to me - never rehearsed - only imagined. Even though I had seen it done, I had no idea that it all had to be done simultaneously and in synch with the rest of the band, but . . . *how hard can this be?*

And then we stepped off into the moving parade - turning a corner right away. *What? Oh, no . . .*

And things suddenly got really real - a dream was going to be a nightmare.

At that moment my Committee - the collective voices in my head that run my mind - started shouting:

*Oh . . . my . . . god!*

*Run now - jump into the first taxi you see.*

*Learn or go home.*

*Don't screw up!*

*You can do it - you've been in worse messes.*

*Aaaaagghhh . . .*

A band is appreciated if it plays often while it marches.

The Beat Goes On Marching Band is greatly appreciated.

Because, essentially, it never stops playing.  
There's no time-out to stop and collect your wits.  
I didn't know about that.

The band is renowned for its crowd-pleasing renditions of two pieces:  
“Louie Louie” and “Wooly Booly” in which they not only play the bloody  
hell out of the music, they sing, make choral moves, sometime wander into  
the spectators, and get a little freaky with their dancing and butt-shaking.  
I didn't know about all that, either.

So while they're wailing away on “Louie Louie” and “Wooly Booly”, there  
was a different march playing in my head: *Don't Fuck Up, Don't Fuck up.*

But most of the band members are experienced pros running on auto-pilot  
when it comes to all the music and moves. *Left Right Left Right* is welded  
into their subconscious brains and they don't have to think about cadence -  
they just do it. They can afford to be loose-goosey.  
They played, they laughed, they waved at the crowd, and they danced.  
They were having a hell of a good time.

Meanwhile . . . terror reigned in the mind of Flashpan Fulghum.  
Photographs of me taken by my wife show a man with a stern and serious  
demeanor, frowning in anxious concentration as he tried to just once get all  
the parts together - *left right, line up side and front, hit the cymbal licks, and  
don't screw up.*  
He looked like he was going to a funeral or directly into battle.

At first, it was just plain hard.  
If I concentrated on keeping cadence, I lost my place in the music and  
missed my big solo cymbal . . . delayed CLASH! *Wrong.*  
If I concentrated on my place in the music, I lost my place in line and drifted  
back into the tuba section. *Wrong.*  
And I was all over the map when it came to making turns. *Ooops, sorry.*  
My cadence was *Left, no, right, skip, right, no, left, skip, damn.*

I imagined dropping out and hiding in the bushes, or just wandering away,  
catching a bus for a far away city, or collapsing and being carried away in an  
Aid Car to an Emergency Room at a hospital suffering from acute marching-  
band-parade-fatigue-syndrome.

But, that was in the beginning - the first six blocks.

The wiser voices in my Committee eased my fears.  
*The International Committee for Cymbal Playing Certification is not here to watch and judge you.*  
*This is not a competition or a test - no losers, only winners.*  
*It's night - nobody can really see you.*  
*And, because you are in the band, you have credibility - spectators will think that whatever you do, that's what you are supposed to do.*  
*It's not all about you - it's about the band . . . and the spectators.*

And about half way through the parade I finally synched in with the band.  
It's a group-mind thing - a beehive mentality - when one's self-concern shifts into a concerned connection with the whole of the marching unit.  
I stopped thinking about me and started playing in the band.  
Marched in cadence, hit my licks, even twirled the cymbals twice.

I began noticing the spectators, who were applauding and smiling and singing and dancing along with the infectious music and attitude of the band.  
We were carriers and spreaders of delight.  
We were a Salvation Army Band bringing the Gospel of Good News and Good Music to the world.  
Wooha!

And I was finally *there*.  
Hitting my mark in time again and again.  
Bamity Bam, CLASH, Bamity Bam, CLASH, bamity bamity bamity bam!  
CLASH! Louie Louie . . . Wooly Bully . . . Yes!

And I remembered that the band was set up by the dancers and twirlers and flag wavers moving ahead of us, announcing who we were.  
The lovely ladies in their middle years, strutting their stuff, told the world that we were something special - not over the hill and on the sidelines - but in the thick of it all - in the parade, still going strong.  
When the twirlers threw their batons in the air, shook their booties, and caught the batons in synch, the crowd went wild.

*All through the stand-around time the director and members of the band were kind and generous and supportive to me.*  
*"Don't worry - do your thing - just have fun."*  
*They said that to me over and over.*

*They'd all been rookies once.  
They knew I was in over my head; knew I was cymbally incompetent; and  
laughed when I missed my cue in practice.  
They didn't shut me out - they invited me in.  
And I accepted the invitation, knowing that, with generous people like them,  
I could not fail.*

*It reminded me of the time in Greece on the island of Crete when I  
apologized for my mangling of the Greek language and customs.  
The village priest assured me that I was appreciated.  
"We had an opening for village idiot, and you showed up to fill it.  
Every village needs a fool - it keeps us loose."*

A fourth big truth:

You have to be strong and tough to be in The Beat Goes On Marching Band.  
It's not a gig for sissies or wimps.

Recall that most of the band members are middle-aged or older.

Yet the band got up at the crack of dawn on Saturday in Portland, rode a bus  
for four hours to Seattle, toured around the city all day, mustered and waited  
and played and danced and marched for four hours, and got back into the bus  
for a four-hour ride home arriving around 2 a.m.

No problem.

And they'll do it again and again and again.

The director, Steve Tolopka, is much admired and respected by the band.  
He conducts the music, manages the band appearance schedule and website,  
coaches the sections, serves as group therapist and drill sergeant, plays lead  
saxophone, marches, dances, and calls the tunes as the band moves along.  
He moves nimbly between being a stern taskmaster and rowdy player.  
A one man dynamo keeping the juice flowing.

Compared to that, banging along with cymbals was nothing.

What does it take to be in The Beat Goes On Marching Band?

Enough talent to play music.

Enough energy to march.

A desire to be actively involved and engaged in ongoing Life.

A constant concern for the band as a whole.

Examples: Water carriers, dressed in band uniforms, circulated through the band as it marched, keeping the players hydrated. The lead horn from the front line suddenly stood still as the band passed around him - because he was standing on a sunken manhole cover that might trip somebody up in the dark. He played his way back to the front and the beat went on. The tight sisterhood of the dancers and twirlers who maintained eye contact with each other from beginning to end. The drummer who subtly goosed me with a drumstick to cue me around the corner turns.

Final big truth:

Above all, to be in the band demands a hugely positive attitude.

Anything can go wrong, but the band can handle it.

I never heard anybody grouse or complain or bitch or moan.

Everyone in the band did their part with great good will.

The beat that went on was always an upbeat.

The motto of the band seems to be, "We Are Invincible."

I came home limping in a state of exhausted euphoria.

My heart still beating in cadence, my fingers and ankles swollen.

My ears still ringing from having banged two brass garbage can lids in front of my face for two hours while being blasted by drums on either side of me and boomed on by the tuba line playing behind me.

I fell asleep with the sound of music playing in my mind . . .

*Louie Louie, Wooly Booly, bam bam CLANG/CLASH.*

I finally got to watch the full parade - the next morning on YouTube.

When The Beat Goes On Marching Band went by they didn't look old or ragged or sound tinny.

They looked great - sounded great - and got more response from the spectators than any other band in the parade.

And I didn't even notice the cymbal player.

He didn't stand out at all.

He seemed like he was just another part of the band.

And he was . . .