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Mapping the Garden Genome

John Friel

O, how I love to share a well-turned phrase. Today's offering, by Robert Wilson Lynd, appeared in the local paper thusly: "Bh'o ctnqoh bnsqobrtz hq pznznrzp wqe hpcrba c stcaz hwbo eqptf bo ewzd qdz bo stcgbdr yqtv." Isn't that great?

Yes, it was in the puzzle section. Decrypted, it reads, "It's almost impossible to remember how tragic a place this world is when one is playing golf."

Alas, when I attempt golf, the links become just another tragic part of the planet. But bumper sticker wisdom says, "Time spent _____ing is not deducted from your allotted life span." You alone get to fill your blank with that thing you love enough that it engages your whole self, crowding out all else. Lynd's path to Nirvana is hardly the only course.

My blank is filled with water and the human-powered craft that make me one with it. By paddle or oar, surrounded by forest, desert, farmland or canyon, I embrace the cathartic amnesia Lynd found gripping a niblick. "It is in games," he wrote, "that many men discover their paradise." Most of us would be better served playing games ourselves than watching others play them for us, but that's not germane here.

Lynd—author, editor, Irish nationalist—knew something of the world's capacity for tragedy. His life spanned two World Wars and a broad swath of The Troubles, the bitter bloody brawl that finally cast the yoke of centuries of British oppression from Ireland's neck. His many acts of pithy eloquence include this: "The belief in the possibility of a short decisive war appears to be one of the most ancient and dangerous human illusions." Yet he struck a balance of mind, penning both "The Passion of Labour" and "The Pleasures of Ignorance."

It's essential to one's humanity to remember how tragic a place the world is. It's essential to one's sanity to contrive to forget that very fact or at least set it aside sometimes.

The human genome's infinite variety spawns a Gandhi, a Mother Teresa, an MLK Jr. or a Clara Barton sparingly, just a precious few per generation. Luckily, there are such individuals—those in whom conviction, compassion and courage converge and focus, as a magnifying lens fuses scattered shards of sunlight into a white-hot point of truth. Most of us can't live in that blinding place, that pure state, for more than moments at a

time. We are fortunate to share this tragic planet with stronger, nobler creatures.

We need those blanks that only we get to fill in. We in the green industries can count it among our blessings that so many discover their paradise, fill their blanks, decode their personal puzzles, by availing themselves of our products and services.

I have a good friend who, after long days spent populating spreadsheets, goes home to garden. Planning, planting, weeding, fertilizing, pruning, harvesting, sweating—she calls it playing. She glows with quiet gratification when passers-by pause to praise her borders—a frequent occurrence.

The aforementioned newspaper profiled a retired professor whose expansive garden includes a whimsical homage to his favorite movie, complete with yellow brick pathway and scaled-down Emerald City. His fall cutback creates 15 truckloads of trimmings.

This is no mere recreation, no idle pastime. These are magnificent obsessions and we are their beneficiaries.

Lynd touched lightly, and not flatteringly, on our bailiwick: “There is nothing in which the birds differ more from man than the way in which they can build and yet leave a landscape as it was before.”

Yeah, not our style. Especially not golf course architects. **GP**

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