

Winners, every one:

I walked into a casino the other day. It's a big one in a neighboring state. It's on a Reservation and it's clearly a terrific business for the Nation. The rooms were full, even at two o'clock in the afternoon. There are hundreds of players intently trying their luck at myriad games, all of which are stacked in the House's direction.

I couldn't avoid the thought that all these folks might as well be sitting on milking stools dropping money into five-gallon buckets that the House happily empties on a regular basis. Imagine people lined up at your door waiting to come into your kitchen where they plop their cash on your table, push it around a little bit, talk to themselves about rotten luck and go home, leaving their money with you. You'd have quite a nice business.

You know they will leave their money with you. **They** know they will leave their money with you. And **still** they leave their money with you!

The players at the casino were not the idle rich on a cruise through the Caribbean frittering away their disposable wealth before cocktails and lobster with the Captain. The players are mostly seniors of no great means to whom little is disposable, some of whom will skip their next meal in order to drop a few more quarters into the House bucket. These are retired folks, folks on pensions, social security and less. Many require assistance to get to the House bucket. There are manual wheel chairs, power wheel chairs, scooters, crutches, walkers and walkers with hand brakes. The lucky ones have companions to help them around. The not so lucky take twenty minutes to find the restrooms.

They play slots mostly. There are more than two thousand to choose from. They play slots with twelve buttons and slots with three buttons. They play slots that sport wrestling graphics, dragon graphics, pretty lady graphics, battlefront graphics and galaxy graphics. Included in the art on every machine is a layout showing what you will win, when you win. All the slots hum. They are never loud and never quiet. The entire room, a huge room, hums as a result. It hums an indistinguishable tune that is not unpleasant and not pretty. With the low light and constant drone this could just as easily be a termites nest or a bunker beneath the Pentagon. Except you can't smoke in the Pentagon.

Most of the machines are occupied. People obviously have their favorites. Being of a quiet disposition I chose one with few buttons and no mysteries. I carefully made my ten dollars last nine minutes. Many of the players are hooked into their machines with frequent player cards, basically a rewards card that remains in the slot machine slot for as long as you play. It is tethered to the player by a curly cord. Some attach it to their shirt, some to their wrist. I saw one player who attached it to her purse.

In the half hour that I was in the House I saw eleven people smiling. One was a patron who was just entering the building and the other ten were employees of the House. If I were in another venue where no one was smiling I would think things weren't going so well. Odd for a place of amusement. Amusement parks are full of smiles, right? Not here. I have seen more smiles at wakes. Heck, I've seen more happy faces on the bench of the Minnesota Vikings.

So why do we go if it doesn't make us happy? Why would you do something you were almost certain to fail at? Why would you take money you will need and drop it down a hole? I guess it's because there's the possibility, the outside chance that we'll be the one to beat the House. I guess it's because slots are easy to do, just sit and drop your money into the bucket. I guess it's because too many of us have lives where hope is more useful than reason.

There's a big sign at the main entrance to the House. It says, "**Where the winners are.**" It just so happens that the sign is hanging over the Casino's Offices.