

My Summer Vacation:

This year I've decided to do something different for my summer vacation. As it happens, I've been wondering about a trip through time to the middle ages. I don't know exactly which of those middle ages I'd want to visit but let's say some time in the 13th century and maybe somewhere in Italy. How about Florence? I have a marvelous friend in Denver, Angela, who talks about taking the journey with me. She's wise and witty and will play extremely well when we get there, whichever role she chooses. She is perfectly cast as the lady of the court or the village maid. It doesn't matter. She knows things and she likes knowing things. These are critical qualities for time travel. It would be impossible to transport one's self to a distant world if, at a minimum, one wasn't conversant with what was happening at the time. Whether a mace or a mantilla, if you have to ask what it is, you probably don't belong in the scene.

Qualifications aside, don't you think it would be fabulous to be on the ground and walking around in a world as far from our own as we are from certain space travelers eight centuries hence? We have the benefit of hindsight and history, as inaccurate as the latter may be. We do know a lot of what happened. We do know a number of the players. We do know the disasters and the triumphs. That's a terrific advantage. No doubt about it, if you're going to time travel in comfort, travel backwards.

One of the difficulties would be handling the advantage of knowing so many things that the locals didn't. It would be a challenge not to get carried away with telling folks all that you know. Most of us have experienced the classic know-it-all. You may even live with one. Veronica does. Twenty-first century science and sophistication would be fairly mind boggling to citizens of the 13th century. In fact, there's a decent chance that if you spouted too much of what you "know", you could get yourself invited to a bonfire. And they wouldn't be toasting smores.

Anyway, Angela has the idea that she would dress as a sophisticated man of the day, maybe a scholar. She's been around the block; I wouldn't have thought of that. She knows that in those days, a new man in town would be accepted far more readily than a strange woman. By adopting the male guise she would end run all the nonsense about whether she was qualified, based on gender, to discuss the great issues. If we played our cards right we might even get to sit in on a conversation with Thomas Aquinas, the Dominican

friar, who remains one of the great minds of western thought. Even way back in the 13th Century he was wondering why women weren't permitted to study at the University. Imagine that. I would give my right leg to hear Angela and Thomas opine on the great topics. Heck, I would give a toe just to see them say hello.

While Angela would be discoursing on diverse topics at the University I'm sure that I would be dealing with such amenities as toilets and plumbing and pain relief and domestic pets. Call me what you will, my cares are mundane. I confess that camping, even in 21st Century America, is a challenge for me. Breakfast is way too important. So the thought of using a chamber pot, washing in a cold basin and skipping the morning meal makes me weak in the knees.

So why choose travel back in time at all? If I have a hard time with the "details" of life, why would I want to put myself in a place rife with detail issues? It's because I also crave to know the "reasons" of life. History is a long continuum of ideas following ideas, of rationale following rationale. It would be fascinating to be on the ground as kings justified being kings. It would be enlightening, albeit painful, to hear the privileged telling the under privileged why the privileged are in charge. I would love to hear the local barber explain why blood letting is the answer for everything from headache to heart disease. I would want to stand on the earth that everyone knew was flat, around which the sun revolved. I would try to understand how anyone could promote a Crusade populated by children.

But I would also want to experience some of the notions that are still true and abiding. That local food is real food. That family is at the center of life. That you need a reason to live, if only to deal with the fact that life is tough and then you die.

I have seen Chartres, the magnificent cathedral on a plain in northern France. It was never clearer to me what the medieval idea was all about. Rising from vast, level fields is this astounding monument to the faith of humans. It was built by the labor of generations of workers. Out of nowhere grows a song to the idea that we are not alone. It says that life is tough and then you rest in peace. Absolutely compelling.

So where was I? Oh yeah, it would be such a trip to be walking around in those days with Angela as my guide and bodyguard. She would tip me off as to what to watch out for from the local wise guys, the philosophers and the prelates. I would let her know that cabernet is

cabernet no matter what century you're sipping. That's what you want on a road trip, isn't it? Complimentary intelligence. In other words, you never get tired of each other. In fact, you can't get enough of each other.

A drive through time to a destination you could only have imagined accompanied by a kindred spirit; now that's my idea of a summer vacation.