

Giving Thanks for Fluff
By
Daniel E. White November 18, 2024

One evening, in the midst of the recent campaign season, we watched a made-for-BBC movie called “That Day We Sang.” The late Victoria Wood developed the story, wrote the lyrics and most of the music as well as the script, and directed the play around a simple premise. A man and a woman drifting through their middle age meet at the filming of a TV program about the Manchester Children’s Choir, a source of civic pride for the city in the late 1920s and 1930s until undone by the Great Depression.

They were both members of the Children’s Choir but hardly knew one another. In the course of filming the show, the man, in the middle of remembering, sheds a tear recalling the joy he got from singing, something he has not done much since. She has not either. His emotion touches her. They have lunch together, and the romantic comedy musical is off and running.

Wood’s lyrics reminded us of Sondheim’s cleverness and some of the compositions had rhythmic reminiscences of his work as well. The story contains the usual twists and turns, offering this hurdle and that, but in the end... Well, watch the movie.

When the credits were rolling, Judy chuckled, “what an enjoyable bit of fluff,” and I agreed.

For two hours, we were charmed by the children’s choir practicing. Among other pieces they sang was the song “Nymphs and Shepherds,” by Henry Purcell. It was first performed as part of the play, “The Libertine” by Thomas Shadwell, his version of the legend of Don Juan... in 1695! Purcell’s work was the signature song of the Manchester Children’s Choir during its brief history.

“Nymphs and shepherds, come away,
In this grove let's sport and play;
For this is Flora's holiday,
Sacred to ease and happy love,

To music, to dancing and to poetry. Your flocks may now securely rest
While you express your jollity! Nymphs and shepherds, come away.”

I wonder how many of the children knew what a nymph was? To make that point, in “That Day We Sang,” the choir director asks one boy to describe a nymph; he responded by describing a shrimp. But then, the kids really did not need to know exactly what a nymph was. It was enough for them to understand that the nymphs were being invited to “sport and play.”

For two hours, we escaped the cacophony of the campaign, the tragedy ongoing in the Middle East, the onslaught of assaults in our email accounts and phone texts from fraudsters and purveyors of myriad opportunities to buy the latest or the best or at least the trendiest of this or that. Thank heavens for those two hours of fluff.

About the same time, a news item drew my attention to *Calvin and Hobbes*, the boy and his companion tiger given to us for just ten years by Bill Watterson. For Calvin, Hobbes, and

Watterson, the “world was a magical place with plenty to discover and explore, as long as we embrace imagination and our sense of adventure,” as one observer wrote.

In fact, the last line written in a *Calvin and Hobbes* strip was “It’s a magical world, Hobbes, ol’ buddy—Let’s go exploring and ride away on our sled.”

Like so many memorable comic strips, *Calvin and Hobbes* bundled into relatively few panel drawings and words that, on many days, drew chuckles, and sometimes outright guffaws. The strip was fluff, intended as a brief departure from the ponderous nature of the news in the rest of the paper. Not far beneath the fluff, though, was the point Watterson meant for us to ponder if we took the time.

Even in naming his friends, Watterson sent a message. The boy was named for John Calvin, the 16th century theologian who was adamant about predestination and seemed devoid of the capacity to laugh. Hobbes, the 17th century philosopher, considered human beings as brutes who required governing with an iron hand lest, through their exercise of free will, they sink into freedom that would only lead to evil-doing.

Watterson said that his inspiration was his gray tabby, Sprite, “long-body, myriad facial mannerisms, enthusiastic on occasion, given to sneaking up on you.” Take that, you 16th and 17th century sour-pusses!

People of a Certain Age, isn’t it remarkably easy to fall victim to the unhealthy expectation of our media-obsessed environment that we need to know everything, right now, at any hour on every day? Might not a bit more fluff each day be an antidote? If you have feelings of anxiety, “take two bits of fluff and 20 minutes each day outside observing nature and call me in a week.”

Even, perhaps especially in retirement, Judy and I sometimes feel like we have responsibilities for which we have volunteered that preclude “sport and play,” or “expressing our jollity.” Those moments are prisons of our own choosing. And they miss a point about fluff most of us learned early in life.

Remember being excited when you found a dandelion gone completely to seed, all of those gray- white, hang-glider seeds—fluff—still attached, and how much fun it was to blow on them and watch them scatter? Moments of pure joy that, oh by the way, usually resulted in bright new yellow dandelions.

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