

The sense of communitas

Things were going so well. Last week was a busy time in Vermillion, filled with lots of good news. Hard work by community leaders, who had teamed up with state government officials, educators at the University of South Dakota, and private industry, means a new employer is coming to town.

It's the stuff you want to shout from the rooftops, and indeed, the modern equivalent of that occurred. A press conference was held on the USD campus Wednesday, March 13. The news was so important that Gov. Dennis Daugaard took time from his busy schedule to participate.

The next day was sunny and mild in Vermillion, and it ended with our local citizens entering the Eagles Club with a bit of a spring in their steps to take part in the annual Vermillion Chamber of Commerce and Development Company's banquet.

This event rightfully tends to be a congratulatory, backslapping time. It's a time for a cross section of our city to gather, to enjoy each other's fellowship, to review and take stock of where we are and what has taken place in the past year.

It is a time to celebrate the successes that we, as a community, have been able to accomplish. It is a time where we may easily convince ourselves that, yes, we have the ability to control the world we live in.

Lt. Gov. Matt Michels, who grew up in Vermillion, fired up the banquet crowd with energetic, humorous banter. His talk eventually took a serious tone, as he described how growing up in Vermillion was not easy. His father left town, seeking work, and decided never to come back, writing to his mother that he was divorcing her.

He told the story of how time and again, members of the Vermillion community came to his mother's aid as she struggled to keep a roof over her family's heads and food on the table. What could be described as a classic tale of neighbors helping neighbors is a true-life story for the Michels family and the people of Vermillion.

An acquaintance was working that evening at the banquet, taking photos of the festivities. It seemed a bit odd, in the middle of last Thursday's event, that he apparently left and was replaced with another local photographer.

While good food and boisterous revelry was being dished up at the Eagles Club, a tragedy was unfolding in Sioux Falls. Jay and Lara Wallace of Vermillion and their six children had traveled to Sioux Falls on this welcoming, mild day to enjoy the scenery of the Big Sioux River at Falls Park.

Their youngest son, Garrett, evidently while wandering near the water's edge, slipped into the icy river. His older sister, Madison, who we have learned in the last week often unselfishly thought of others, did what she had to do.

She went in after him. So did a bystander, Lyle Eagle Tail.

The young lad somehow survived

the icy plunge and was able to scramble to an area where he could be plucked, unharmed from the river.

Madison and Lyle perished in their attempt to rescue the young boy.

The absent photographer, I later learned, is a close friend of the Wallace family. He dropped everything so that he and his family could do what ever was humanly possible to help their friends.

One of the purposes of Michels' speech at the March 14 banquet was to drive home the sense that Vermillion truly is a city whose people choose to work together and in the meantime, care for one another. It's a spot on the prairie that strives to be a good place to live, learn and have fun.

BETWEEN THE LINES



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Michels could not know, nor could any of us for that matter, that this sense of community, this communitas, was beginning to play out in real time as he spoke.

Turns out we can't control what happens in the world. Certainly good things pop up in our lives all of the time. Yet, there are times when a multitude of bad things happen in a blink of an eye. The dust settles. We find our world is diminished in ways we can neither change nor understand.

I watched Tuesday night as the community said goodbye to Madison at her funeral. I left the church with no new insight as to why bad things happen to good people. I was, however, uplifted with the realization (and this certainly isn't a first for me, personally) that when really bad things happen, when your life gets tossed on its head, Vermillion is one of the best places to receive the support, the solidarity, the caring gestures small and large, to get back on your feet again.

The Wallace family, in turn, did its best to help our community try to get a sense of the happenings of the past week. Tuesday night they shared this quote from Jenkin Lloyd Jones during their daughter's service:

"Anyone who imagines that bliss is normal is going to waste a lot of time running around shouting that he has been robbed. The fact is that most putts don't drop, most beef is tough, most children grow up to be just like people, most successful marriages require a high degree of mutual toleration, and most jobs are more often dull than otherwise. Life is just like an old time rail journey ... delays, sidetracks, smoke, dust, cinders, and jolts, interspersed only occasionally by beautiful vistas and thrilling bursts of speed. The trick is to thank the Lord for letting you have the ride."

To that, all one can say is, "Amen."



A dossier of intoxicating newness

Like any other writer, I had stories to tell this week – a party line of happenings, a parade of reminiscences, pleasant impressions, particular notions that ordinarily would take on complex examinations.

Not this time. No. Rising above all that nice noise, one story delivered a dossier of intoxicating newness. Two words: Pope Francis.

It doesn't matter how Catholic or non-Catholic a person is, Pope Francis stands to make even the most agnostic among us, believers in the power and potential of living simplistically and allowing our actions to resonate goodness and service.

What's not to like about this humble man, who just days ago went by Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio and now has adopted the name of the most influential servant saint of all time: Saint Francis of Assisi.

Previously dwelling smack dab in the middle of the capitol of Argentina, Buenos Aires, the Argentine native of Italian heritage, was known to completely shun pomp and circumstance. Almost always blending in with the crowd, now Pope Francis once traded sailing through traffic in a lush leather-lined limousine for jostling along on the endlessly long, noisy, sometimes smelly stop-start cadence of public transit.

He chose to ride to and from work side-by-side with single mothers, rowdy teenagers, downtrodden servants, crying children. Seated right there with the helpless and hopeless, he was and is a living, breathing incarnation of the Gospel.

A man of the cloth in the truest sense, as Cardinal, he elected to cook his own food in a modest third-floor downtown apartment

MY STORY YOUR STORY



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Pope just hours into his papacy, when he gave his inaugural greeting to more than 100,000 onlookers waiting in Saint Peter's Square from the central balcony of Saint Peter's Basilica, Pope Francis had already begun to push status quo full tilt on its axis.

Quickly sending Vatican tradition into a tizzy, he opted to not wear the traditional ornate flashy gold crucifix, preferring the plain metal cross he had always worn. And again exchanging lavishness for simplicity, he shunned red vestments for humbler white vestments.

During his first full day on the job, Francis strongly urged the cardinals, who had gathered in Rome for the conclave, to resist complacency, as best expressed in his first address to them as the Holy Father. "Find new ways to bring evangelization to the ends of the Earth," he said, and then warned them against giving into negativity, describing it as "that bitterness that the devil offers us every day."

Perhaps the closing of his inaugural

greeting gave us all of us a much-needed warm fuzzy, "Goodnight. Sleep well. We will see one another soon."

Like no other, something tells me that one day during his office, those of us dwelling here in the nation's breadbasket, way out here in the interior of the U.S. may see him sooner than later.

I, a fallen-away Catholic, will be in the crowd, waving in solidarity of hope, wiping tears of joy for affable Pope Francis, who even makes us laugh with his own brand of holy humor.

On March 13, 2013, when toasting the cardinals after his election had been announced, Francis simply said, "May God forgive you," which reportedly brought the house down. "In other words," Cardinal Timothy Dolan, the Archbishop of New York, explained, "he was saying, 'I hope you don't regret this later.'"

Made me chuckle. Still does. We have new Pope. Is he like no other? Only time will tell. But for now, he is a candle in the dark, an advocate for the poor and hopefully a clarion voice for victimized.

God speed, Pope Francis.

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A resident of Southeast South Dakota, Paula Bosco Damon is a national award-winning columnist. Her writing has won first-place in competitions of the National Federation of Press Women, South Dakota Press Women and Iowa Press Women. In the 2009, 2010 and 2011 South Dakota Press Women Communications Contests, her columns have earned eight first-place awards. To contact Paula, email boscodamon.paula@gmail.com, follow her blog at my-story-your-story@blogspot.com and find her on FaceBook.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Is jail the answer?

If a person goes into debt and can't pay his or her bills, he or she gets thrown into jail and he or she might lose their job!

The United States of America is in debt and can't pay their bills! So should the president go to jail or should the Congress and everyone between the president and the Congress go to jail!

The government gets paid more every year to keep us in debt.

The president's platform for his first term was for the government to take a cut in pay if they can't get us out of debt! It never happened and we voted him back in to be the president again!

William (Buddy) A. Brose Viborg

PLAIN TALK POLL RESULTS

Should Vermillion ban texting-while-driving now that the SD Legislature has rejected a statewide ban?

Yes, a ban should be implemented by the city council immediately (70%, 119 votes)

No, the same issues, such as ability to enforce the law, that have caused the idea to fail in Pierre make it unworkable in the city. (28%, 48 votes)

I'm undecided. (2%, 4 votes)

Total Voters: 171

To participate in the Plain Talk's weekly poll, log on to plaintalk.net



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