

# WHEN THE PARADE PASSES BY

by Bob McDiarmid (October 2009)

This morning on the train I shared a four seat booth with a man clearly schizophrenic. The entire ride north he had a conversation with himself - asking and answering, with one voice clearly 'in-charge' of another voice that had 'bad ideas' and 'weak, stupid thoughts' that the in charge voice thought should shut up. He inventoried his backpack - reciting as he went where he got each train schedule, bus ticket or piece of paperwork. He took his shoes off and scratched his feet.

He then nonchalantly took out a very large knife and proceeded to cut the liner out of a coat he had. counting the stitches as he went. The knife was a large Swiss Army knife, the kind they give Boy Scouts on their 12th birthday. It took him about 10 minutes and he lost patience then sliced the rest of the liner out of the coat. He put the knife away in his backpack - got up and put the liner in the trash can on the train and came back to his seat.

He then started tapping on his legs very loudly - which got the attention of everyone on our level of the train. These same people had been blissfully unaware as he had the big knife out cutting on his clothes. He stopped suddenly - looked around, and laughing said out loud, "I guess it's a bit too early in the morning for rock and roll, huh?" which several people laughed at. then the conversation in his head continued - and apparently it was the weak voice that spoke out loud; as the in-charge voice muttered whispered obscenities at the people on the train who didn't understand rock and roll.

Then he started undoing his belt and his fly saying almost imperceptibly that he had something to show the world. Fearing for the worst - I leaned over and said that I thought it was probably a good idea to keep his pants on. He looked up at me - making eye contact for the first time on the train ride - and said "you are probably right" - and he did back up his fly and belt - and leaned back in the chair and went immediately to sleep. and thats where he is now, his Colorado Rockies baseball cap pulled down over his face like John Wayne at the end of old time western.

There are few things in the world that worry me or scare me - and this man isn't one of those things. but honestly - the thought of personally falling prey to mental illness does. I can't imagine what its like to have all that noise going on in his head and the obvious battle he's going through. I wonder if the conversations continue in his dreams, in his subconscious. But I also get the feeling that these kinds of journeys are paths these people go down without realizing that they are slipping off from the rest of us.

I volunteered in an Alzheimer's ward back when I lived in Seattle - and played ball every visit with a 83 year old man who lived his life like a big-eyed five year old. and would tell you that - "I'm (holding his hand up in the five position) this old!" and we'd bounce a big plastic ball back and forth and he'd giggle

and laugh. I wonder if inside his mind he could remember the 82 years previous or whether he was living for every moment of his five-year-old 'current' existence.

Sentience and the human spirit are miracles that we live every day. It's no surprise that sometimes the engine that drives us and stores things for us - fails or has a misfire. or fails to do the backup of the data overnight - and loses some or all of it. Sitting across from John Wayne this morning on the train has been an interesting way to start my day. His world is so obviously fractured and a constant barrage of difficult to process mental information.

Selfishly - I have to admit that I'm thankful that I don't have any of his struggle to worry about personally. (besides my voices would probably be Barnaby from 'Hello Dolly!' and Corky from "Roar of the Greasepaint, The Smell of the Crowd") and I don't mean to make light of his situation at all.

We live in a country where in the 80s Ronald Reagan declared that we didn't have mental illness in America and managed the dismantling the care for the mentally ill in the U.S. only to succumb to Alzheimer's Disease himself, the beginnings of which probably started while he was still in office. Add that to the many deep seated reasons I hate Ronald Reagan and the legacy he left in American politics.

When we arrived at the train station in San Francisco - I collected my things. and I said gently, "Hey Pal, we've reached San Francisco." he woke gently and said "oh - thank you" and looked around to collect his stuff.

I know this is a bit heavier than my normal 'lite moment' from the train. but life can't be a constant refrain of "When The Parade Passes By" no matter how much we'd like it to be.