

TALES FROM THE WASTELAND

National Purpose

Am I missing something? By Barry Perryman, Ph.D.

This story was given to me years ago by a tribal elder, and now I give it to you.

Once there was a bear that just sat by the front of his cave all day long, waiting for something to come along so he could kill it and eat. He sat there for a really long time but nothing came along. He sat there so long that he began to get puny and sick. He got so weak he could hardly stand on his feet. And one day he was lying there thinking he might just die when all of a sudden he recognized the sound of a creek a ways off.

He thought to himself, "I should go to this creek and catch some fish." So he began to walk towards the sound of the creek. He was so weak that sometimes he just had to crawl on his belly, and sometimes he had to sit a spell because he was so sick and tired. But he kept going, heading toward that creek. The sound of the water got louder and louder and finally he made it. He could smell the water and the beaver and the willows.

He walked into the creek and reached down and grabbed a fish with his claws and ate it right down. Then he caught another, and another. Soon he had eaten 20, maybe 25 fish. He walked over to the bank and sat down and recognized that he didn't feel so puny anymore, and not so weak.

After a while, he decided to return to his cave and on his way back he found some leaves and roots, so he ate them. He felt even stronger now. And as he was just about to reach his cave he noticed a new smell in the air. It was the scent of berries in the western breeze, but it was faint and a long way off. He said to himself, "I will follow this smell and get some berries to eat."

So he began to walk to the west. He walked all day that day and for two more days. Along the way he would fish when he came to a creek and eat leaves and roots when he found them. And finally, on the third day, he came to the berry patch and it was the biggest berry patch any bear had ever seen! He ate and he ate, and smacked and smacked until he was sticky all over. He rolled around on his back and even got sticky juice on his bohonkus. And when he

had eaten all he could, he lay back and stretched and growled and said to himself, "I'm glad I took the opportunity to get some food for myself today!"

I use this story for all kinds of applications, and this little article is no exception. I have traveled about 12,000 miles on dirt, paved, and semipaved roads in the northwest province of China over the last three years, and I've also spent a great deal of time in the capital city, Urumqi, population three mil-

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China has a collective national goal of becoming the best at everything. It is a genuine national effort. People on the street will tell you. Everyone from the highest levels of government to the lowest shovel-wielding day worker has bought into it. Just like the bear in my story, the Chinese have a national purpose, a massive one.

It is my observation that we, here in America, have no such purpose. We have no collective, national goals. We are just riding a current; we're not steering the boat. We are floating along on a breeze with no intent, direction or purpose. The bear at least wanted to feed himself. Generic goals couched in political statements about preserving the middle class are offensive to me. I am the middle class and I don't want to be preserved. I want to climb higher on the scale. I want the opportunity to better myself, and I want that same opportunity for everyone.

What happened to the days when we were proud of great achievements like Hoover Dam; when we took pride in looking at a great American city; or when we felt the strength that comes from seeing gangs of combines harvesting great fields of wheat and corn in the Midwest? We went to the moon in a decade for crying out loud! There was a time when we were building a nation; when we purposed to be the best at everything; when the West meant ranching, mining and the hard work and ideals that embodied what America stood for.

Where is our national work ethic? Is there anyone even talking about it? Is there anybody out there?

To be the best, sometimes you do things because they are hard and they are the right thing to do. It seems there is no civic mindedness taught in our schools or at home anymore. Do we teach kids that they should grow up and do things that will benefit society and that they have a responsibility to make their town, county, state and country the best place to live?

President John F. Kennedy said, "Once you say you're going to settle for second, that's what happens to you in life."

I think our national leadership deserves much of the blame, and all their high talk ain't worth doodly-squat. Maybe we have been this lost before in our history, but we have always had the fortitude and desire of that ol' bear that found himself in a state of decline and did something about it.

Am I missing something? ■

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