

5-31-13 Grand Opportunities

Visiting grand children offers grand opportunities for public health lessons, some of them predictable and planned, others unforeseen. Joey once declared that his mother (my daughter, Renee) was “a looker”. “Why, thank you, Joey!” my daughter responds, thinking he was saying she was good looking, which she is, I must say. However, Joey went on to explain his meaning; his mother was “a looker” because before she buys anything, she looks and looks and looks. She is indeed a good shopper: thrifty with an eye for quality. Getting by, being patient, making the best use of your money and always putting some aside are all important aspects of being responsible. Taking care of yourself and your family is participation in a critical form of fiduciary patriotism; it means one less family expecting to be taken care of. It means one more family who is living in safe housing and eating well without government assistance. That’s a good thing.

A recent visit to Connecticut to visit two more grandchildren offered more opportunities to see public health in action and through history. We decided to skip an art festival we had been looking forward to attending at the beautiful Wilcox Park in nearby Westerly, Rhode Island, for the day was cold, windy and raining. It wasn’t just the joy of art, landscaping and architecture I missed out on; I had promised my grandchildren that when I bought that hotdog from one of those mobile food trucks, I would watch and make sure that safe food handling was being practiced! Oh, well, there will more opportunities for that.

While five year old Taryn was at a Sunday morning birthday party, a visit to the Mystic Seaport with my grandson, Colin presented me with not only a look at how an organization handles crowds, food, bathrooms and signage but also a tour through history. We always have similar health needs such as food, shelter, health, safety, communication, education and entertainment but how they are accomplished has changed dramatically. One antique house we visited had the welcoming aroma and warmth of a fire going in a fireplace. I could see little square metal vented boxes with a handle on top to be filled with hot coals. They kept feet warm while in the carriage and while listening to those long church sermons. Also, there were pieces of soapstone with metal handles getting warm next to the fire for warming beds and, once wrapped in cloth, for hands and feet. At the fireplace a woman was scooping red hot coals under and then over a cast iron covered pot, very much like a “Dutch oven”. The pot had cake batter in it and would bake with the heat of the coals. These multiple uses of coals for cooking and safe methods of keeping warm were ideas from the past to keep in mind for people who have fireplaces and wood burning stoves during power outages. Most of us need to learn how to shelter in place rather than expecting the government to supply food and shelter. Just imagine; without any electricity or oil, they kept warm and ate cake!

On the way out of that antique house, I asked my grandson if he had seen a bathroom. He looked around and told me that he could not see one. I pointed to the enameled covered pot on the floor at the foot of the bed. He looked at me with understanding and I nodded my head.

Yep, the cover was to help keep the odors in. “What did they do with it? How did it get emptied?” “Oh, it would be dumped outside. I think that was a job for children. Everyone worked, you know and everyone had to help!” He looked skeptical. “No, really,” I told him.

In another house, it was time to wash dishes. There was one large bowl for washing and another for rinsing. I asked where the wash water would go after she was done, since there wasn't any plumbing. I wondered if wash water went one place, such as the garden and the chamber pot's contents off to a different “special” place. “No, everything was dumped any old place, the street, the yard, a ditch.” Since they didn't know about germs and thought washing too much or too often was an unhealthy practice, I guess that made sense. On the way out, Colin and I talked about germs and the need for a microscope to see them. The idea of harmful creatures so tiny as to be invisible did sound crazy, once you thought about it that way. It is no wonder people did not believe in them when the evidence was first presented.

My favorite part of the visit to Mystic Seaport was the entry to the Stillman Building where you see the many exhibits under the title, “Voyages: Stories of America and the Sea”. As we left the area where a woman stood next to a small wooden boat and told the story of a group of people who successfully arrived in the United States from Cuba in that little boat, she said, “Enjoy the exhibits and unless you are a Native American, you will see that we are all immigrants and new comers to this country.” Understanding and tolerance are part of public health, too.

They were all grand lessons.

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My daughter is a looker.