

South Park Significance

South Park had a hard winter this year. No, not the cartoon South Park, but Colorado's ten thousand foot high, forty miles wide, and hundreds of miles long grassland surrounded by mountains. It was March, and I was driving across South Park on my way to Montrose to the grand opening of a Sports Authority store. The trip takes close to five hours from Littleton so I had plenty of time to think. I say it was a hard winter realizing that's a relative term. This high plain with rolling hills and miles of grazing land is tortured by freezing winds and drifting snow every winter, but this winter was remarkable with blizzard after blizzard. The very road I was driving on, highway 285, was repeatedly blocked by eight foot deep snow drifts, sometimes for days.

I had to head out early to get to Montrose by noon so I drove through the morning hours past Aspen Park, down Crow Hill to Bailey, and climbed Kenosha Pass. I must have seen fifty Stellar's Jays along the road on that stretch, which is many more than I had ever seen before. They are shaped like a Blue Jay but with body feathers that are an iridescent blue and the head and crest are black. This is big game country, and with so much snow the deer and elk that had been hit by cars through the winter were quickly buried and preserved. Now that the snow was mostly gone, many carcasses lined the road and were irresistible to the feathered scavengers including the jays looking for bugs. Up in the park the ravens, vultures, and eagles fed on the road kill itself.

I am struck by the enormity of South Park every time I crest Kenosha pass and see it spread out before me. The Middle Fork of the South Platte River winds back and forth through the pastures down the center of the Park. For every mile it travels down the valley it must wind for five miles. I know South Park is forty miles wide because as you come off of Kenosha pass a highway sign warns to watch for elk for the next forty miles. Traditionally this was buffalo country. Cattle have taken their place now, but elk, mule deer and pronghorn antelope still roam free. During the short summer up here this is pretty country with enough water to grow lots of grass and more. The purple irises called blue flag fill the valley in June and the yellow blooms of Potentilla bushes line the Middle Fork through most of the summer, but March is the ugly time of year. Repeated freezing and thawing leaves gray mud, or frozen gray mud and what's left of last year's grass. Patches of crusty snow spot the landscape and snow showers will still blow through regularly. This is a hard cruel time for people and animals alike in South Park. Only the scavengers do well before the summer grasses fill the valley.

As I passed the elk warning sign at the bottom of Kenosha pass I ran into a South Park traffic jam. I was going at least seventy miles an hour but the pickup and the vehicle in front of it were doing about fifty. I could see a mile of empty road past them so I didn't even slow down but slipped into the oncoming lane of the two lane road and zipped right past them. As I passed I saw that the pickup truck carried only the driver and the front vehicle was a hearse. I had just buzzed a very short funeral procession. A combination of the bleak windblown landscape, the twisted and picked over road kill that lined the road, and the extra time that I had to dwell on it, kept bringing my mind back to that hearse with only one car following it. I had to slow down to go through Fairplay and noticed that the Furniture and Antique shop hadn't survived the winter either and was up for sale. Who would only have one person at

their burial? It was as if I had seen the dream of Ebenezer Scrooge, but this was no dream. A body would be buried today in this desolate wind blown place with only one witness.

As a motivational speaker I spend much of my time writing and speaking about success. We all go through down times; the Marches of life, but successful people overcome these obstacles and continue toward their desires. Had the dead man taking his last ride across South Park been a success in life? I don't think he could have been because success takes teamwork and leadership. As a team leader you think we instead of me. With we as a focus, lifelong relationships are formed. With we as a focus you can move beyond success to significance or as some people call it legacy building. I was thinking about this when I drove past some cows and their very young calves further down the road outside of Salida. The mothers, each with a brand on their hip and a green plastic rectangle clipped to one ear, stood and chewed their cud, or tried to graze on what was left of last year's grass. Many of the newborns slept on the bare ground between the crusty snow patches, but some of the unmarked calves ran and played, thrilled with the prospects of life on South Park. I saw a Western Blue Bird land on a fence post and a pair of Mallard Ducks in the Arkansas River. Maybe summer would come after all.

Springtime in the Rockies is a strange mixture of the futile and the promising. The little calves reminded me of the last day of the 2005 ski season at Winter Park. My family and I skied down the melting snow in sixty degree weather through a migration of Painted Lady Butterflies. They were passing through from California and were so thick that you needed goggles to keep them from getting in your eyes. Seasons of futility come to an eventual end and so do seasons of plenty. Change is inevitable, but you will always have people who care about you if teamwork and leadership are priorities for you and become part of who you are.

Karl Mecklenburg the Leadership Linebacker

Keynote speeches that inspire long term positive change in teams and individuals.

www.karlmecklenburg.com