

Staining a deck rail one podcast at a time

A reflection in the time of Covid19
by Pat Keithly

It is the beginning of March 2020. The new deck railing which we had put in six years ago is showing signs of wear. The recurring need to wash off the pollen and the “green stuff” has exposed some bare wood. It’s time for some DIY!

Obtaining the deck stain should not be difficult. I have the can, the color, the code. I know where it was purchased. However, this presents an unexpected obstacle. They no longer make this color or this product and none of the colors on the chart the assistant hands me are in any way comparable to what was used before, so my project would involve, not a touch-up, but a total redo in another color. Not what I had in mind, so I go home to think it over.

I had already tried prying off the lid of the old can, which was really rusted shut, but this time with some patience, persistence and muscle the thing comes off and amazingly the can is almost full and the stuff looks pretty good! If I can just transfer it to other containers without getting any rust in there, I should be good to go.

Now let’s talk about the project. The decking is of another material and must be protected. The uprights are metal and do not need painting, and so I begin the meticulous process of covering the decking, carefully painting around each upright railing with a tiny brush before spreading color along the length of the rail. I go as carefully as I can. I know my attention span for such detailed work is not long. Eventually I will get careless and splash or spill the stain so I listen to a podcast for each length of deck rail. A podcast lasts about 50 minutes. I judge that 50 minutes is about the length of time I can do this kind of work and that if I listen to something interesting I will not get bored too quickly. 50 minutes of careful concentration while keeping my mind engaged should do the trick!

Some of my audio companions in this project are “This American Life”, “Hidden Brain”, “On Being”, and the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures read aloud by a variety of voices on YouTube. I readily confess here, that the prophets of the Hebrew scriptures might not be high on my list of “must read” or even “must listen to”, but they are required reading for my EfM (Education for Ministry) class at the moment and therefore must be covered.

As I begin my project the Covid 19 global pandemic is creeping closer and closer. Each day that I go outside to work on my project, one more sector of society has shut down. More businesses have closed, more people have died. The timeline for social distancing extends from two weeks to two months, to who-knows-how-long? The podcasts get darker and darker in their themes as the hosts address the creeping menace of this little-understood pathogen that threatens our previously comfortable American lives. At one point I have to take out my earbuds. A story of

one person's battle with the disease is a bit more than I can handle. Likewise those prophets in my ear continue to wail about strife, war, injustice, disease, and famine.

I picture Rome and New York as I hear

"How lonely sits the city that once was full of people" is the cry from Lamentations (Lamentations 1:1)

Jeremiah calls to me from ages past:

*"Since my people are crushed, I am crushed;
I mourn, and horror grips me.
Is there no balm in Gilead?
Is there no physician there?
Why then is there no healing
For the wound of my people?" (Jeremiah 8: 20-21)*

Isaiah takes the imagination to dark places in his apocalyptic chapters:

*"The earth dries up and withers
The world languishes and withers
The heavens languish with the earth" (Isaiah 24:4)*

And yet I also reflect on how much comfort I am receiving from this work. Yes, I could have hired a contractor, who would probably have figured out how to remove and reinstall the uprights railings, would have masked everything and gone at it with his paint sprayer, but there is something more appropriate for the moment in this careful work done by hand using leftover materials accessed only with some degree of persistence and effort. It is work that belongs in a world of undefined timelines. I have no idea how long it will take me. I do not make the calculation. It is even possible that I will get sick and not be able to complete the project. Nonetheless it is something purposeful for me to do alone, physically distanced from others while still outside in God's good creation. The birds are singing, the trees are in bud, and each day something new bursts into bloom. So each day I head out to the deck, earbuds inserted, brush in hand for a short while, rejoicing in the beautiful weather with which God has blessed us in this Spring season, painting my deck rail one podcast at a time. I am alone and yet through my listening connected to humanity throughout the ages. At some point the staining will be finished: at some point so will the pandemic.

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God..... those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength . They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40)