

When you wish upon a star

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On my list of things I want to do before I die: Climb Mount Everest, canoe the Boundary Waters from Ely to Quetico, and visit Disneyland in Anaheim, Calif. Well, I just accomplished the last one with my son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren Aubry, 4, and Gavin, 2 — 54 years after the park opened.

Bob Sehlinger (“The Unofficial Guide to Disneyland 2009”) says, “It’s the ultimate in mass-produced entertainment, the most planned and programmed environment imaginable.” He warns that families should take weeks to prepare mentally and physically for the ordeal and pleasure of navigating the park; his book provides detailed “touring plans” to get a family through the dozens of attractions and rides without going mad.

The entrance to the park is along “Main Street,” an idealized model of a turn-of-the-century small town — specifically, Marceline, Mo., where Walt Disney spent his early boyhood. The park then breaks out into widely separated areas corresponding to classic Disney movie and television themes such as Adventureland, Fantasyland, Frontierland and Tomorrowland, among others.

Beside the adorable Disney characters wandering about in full costume, there are boat rides, train rides and, above all, amusement park rides (including the roller coaster in pitch dark that had me white knuckling but Aubry was just so cool). Despite the ridiculously long lines at most rides — 60- to 90-minute waits for rides lasting three to five minutes — despite the very high costs for admission, food and too many tacky souvenirs, despite the massive crowds and hot weather, most kids and adults actually love the experience. I didn’t, as you might have guessed.

A lot of my problem lies in how totally controlled the experience was. I prefer the freedom of the old-style amusement park: raw, raucous, tawdry. But control and perfection are what the Disney world is all about. In the introduction to the 50th anniversary exhibition, a Disney executive explained its intent: “Walt Disney believed that things can be orderly and clean, that the people who host you and serve you can be friendly and caring, that you can speak to strangers in a public place, that the visual conflicts and contradictions found in our cities can be eliminated ... All of these things, standing as stark contrasts to much of what we find in our city and community experiences, are experiences that reassure us ... that we can provide a better, more orderly and safer world for our families. We leave a Disney park reassured.”

An art historian at the University of Minnesota, Karel Ann Marling, has described Disneyland as the “architecture of reassurance.” Some critics have dubbed the reassuring experience a “benign fascism.”

Disneyland was Walt Disney’s creative dream of perfection, harkening back to a mythic existence of small-town America in some golden age past, and forward to a future of peace and plenty, fueled by American technology and know-how. It was his fantasy wish fulfillment.

I learned from a comprehensive and fair biography by Neal Gabler (“Walt Disney. The Biography,” 2007) that Disney, a high school dropout, grew up hard-scrabble, suffered under a remote, sometimes abusive father and struggled to leave and make it big in the big city.

Disney could be a generous and thoughtful man, that is, until he felt under attack — which in Hollywood was nearly all the time. He then became tyrannical, cruel even to his closest associates, a control freak, a strike-breaker, a bare-knuckled fighter. What made him happy was riding about on his scale model train and dreaming of a technological future, a Tomorrowland.

I am reminded of W.H. Auden’s poem, “Epitaph on a Tyrant,” that begins: “Perfection, of a kind, was what he was after/ And the poetry he invented was easy to understand;/ He knew human folly like the back of his hand,/ And was greatly interested in armies and fleets.”

It has been Walt Disney’s creative vision that has influenced American culture ever since he created that plucky and optimistic creature, Mickey Mouse (it’s Disney’s voice you hear in the cartoons). The culture continues to spread throughout the world, now with no fewer than 11 Disney parks, from France to Japan and even China.

Intellectual critics hate the Disney culture as inauthentic, “the illusion of life without any of the mess,” nature made sentimental and cute, all endings happy, a “Disneyfication” of life. As the British poet Ruth Padel wrote, “In the West, many people like to think we live in a Sunday supplement world in which everything works perfectly. This is a ... dream world. The reality is ... a makeshift hut.”

But when I think back to Disney’s best cartoon fantasies, I find that, like classic fairy tales and like poetry, they speak to the unconscious mind, to authentic feelings. In “Bambi,” for instance, we see random violence, the loss of a parent, the redeeming chance to please a remote father and to take his place. “Snow White” is about coming into sexual maturity, with a cruel mother as rival, but with survival through human kindness. “Dumbo” is the classic tale of the “different” child finding strength in its very difference, and the adolescent Pinocchio develops self-awareness and a conscience, helped along by a good fairy who loves unconditionally.

Oddly enough, Disney’s creations, even when kitsch and vulgar (as in Disneyland), do represent precisely those optimistic illusions that make America desirable to people around the world, that process of overcoming obstacles to be whatever you want to be. Isn’t this strange: I do believe there is a direct line from Walt Disney’s “When You Wish Upon a Star,” to Barack Obama’s “Yes, we can.”

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