

COMMENTARY

Lynne Hughes & Barbara Bennett: Energy again

*Portion of this yew
Is man my grand sire knew,
Bosomed here at its foot:
This branch may be his wife,
A ruddy human life
Now turned to a green shoot.*

*These grasses must be made
of her who often prayed,
Last century for repose;
And the fair girl long ago
Whom I often tried to know
May be entering this rose.*

*So, they are not underground,
But as nerves and veins abound
In the growths of upper air,
And they feel the sun and rain,
And the energy again*

That made them what they were
— Thomas Hardy (1840-1928)

Once in awhile when God sends you a message, you're not too distracted or self-centered to notice. Last Wednesday, I was put on notice. A wet night had left tracks of mottled gray scars across the western sky. The sun fighting in from the east seemed to chase the storm back to the ocean from whence it came. Huge advancing pillars of lenticular clouds announced the changing of the guard. The squall line was marked by 180-degree rainbows, like giant yet fragile ribbons on a gift, visible along the eastern Sierra from Douglas County almost to the Oregon border.

I stepped out my front door to get the morning paper when — softly, suddenly — I crossed over to somewhere else. A gentle, almost tropical wind blew soft,



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warm rain into my face. Was I on Maui, or Martinique? No. For just a few fleeting minutes, the high desert had been transformed into a subtropical Ireland, the heather tones of early spring linked to the patchwork sky by the rainbow connection.

Where was I? I was home. No matter who you are or where you've been, that word conjures up instant images. Last Wednesday morning defined home for me, forevermore. Home is this huge, landlocked island called Nevada, populated by a sea of immigrants.

The skies of St. Patrick's Day sent me a message. For me, there could have been no better moment to get it. I needed a little help last week. St. Patrick was a slave, kidnapped from his native Scotland to Ireland, forced to live naked, tending sheep and swine. He escaped, but returned many years later to attempt to end the slavery and oppression caused by his former masters. He showed special concern for women stolen for sexual exploitation, a feminist 1,600 years ahead of his time. That abused immigrant went on to greatly enrich his adopted land.

As did two Nevezadan women who died last week. My slightly soggy St. Patrick's Day newspaper brought news of Barbara Bennett's death. Later that day, as I was going on the air, I was informed of the

death of Lynne Hughes. I don't know if they ever met each other, but they shared a great talent for enriching their home called Nevada.

Both had husky voices utilized to great effect: Bennett in speaking out, Hughes in singing out.

Barbara Bennett became Reno's mayor during its most turbulent period, the growth with explosion of the late 1970s. This unassuming working wife somehow transformed herself into the charismatic leader Reno lacked, to its detriment, before or since. After long years of frustrating community activism, she made it to the top in the greatest upset in local political history. She lasted less than four years, hired away by incoming Gov. Bryan's administration at a salary she needed for her family.

Lynne Hughes rose to stardom embodying the San Francisco sound which swept rock 'n' roll in the mid-1960s. That rock revolution started in the summer of 1965 at Virginia City's Red Dog Saloon, "turning it into the prototype for the trippy dance concerts that would soon be held in old ballrooms and auditoriums throughout the Bay Area." Rolling Stone wrote three years ago. The Red Dog's chief bartender, saloon sweeper and general roadie was a guy named Travus T. Hipp. He went on to join The Medicine Ball Caravan which criss-crossed the country in the summer of 1970; 160 artists living in teepees and busses and giving free concerts. Lynne Hughes was with the Caravan as part of the seminal San Francisco rock group Stoneground, which had made "Passion Flower" a top-10 hit awhile earlier. (Lynne wrote and voiced

it.) The Caravan played Hyde Park and the Lyceum in London, then went on to Paris and Amsterdam before heading home. Stoneground put out a string of albums, The Medicine Ball Caravan became a feature length movie, Hipp and Hughes became a couple. A few years later, they settled on the Cornstock where Lynne was buried last Thursday.

A bell rang as six tieless men carried a handmade casket down the hill from an old church. As the caravan passed the graveyard's historical marker, the crisp spring wind stopped, almost on cue. Accompanied by a lonely fiddle, we sang Amazing Grace as best we could without the help of the best voice there. As the crowd shuffled in pieces back toward the old church, the wind started blowing toward the Pine Nut Range again.

Wherever you go in Nevada, history surrounds you like a nurturing mother's arms. Like St. Patrick's feast the day before, I felt transported in time and place. Lynne's ceremony was peopled by a cast of characters worthy of mythical Sicily, Alaska. The faces around me could have lived a hundred years ago or a hundred years from now. Hats and flowers, purples and paisleys, beards and tears. I felt part of a loving family sending a member on a journey, a sense long lost in Reno. Perhaps Barbara Bennett's popularity was an attempt to regain such a sense of community in the directionless Truckee Meadows. Perhaps that explains why no one has stepped forward to fill her shoes more than a decade after she left office.

Lynne died on St. Patrick's Day, Barbara, two days prior. Over all the years I

knew them, I always sensed a youthfulness in both, an almost-girlish radiance. That quality never abandoned them, could never wither away. They could still call upon it when necessary, using the energy that made them what they were.

As I began flipping the switches to do Travus' radio show for him last Thursday, for some reason I remembered an obscure principle of physics I hadn't thought about in 30 years. The law of conservation of matter and energy states that matter and energy are neither created nor destroyed, they merely change form, one to the other in an endless, chaotic but organized series of permutations. A zero-sun game.

Imagine, if you will, yourself in transition. From energy to matter, from one dimension to another, from somewhere else, to this island earth, then to somewhere else again. You are matter, you are energy, both constantly flowing, always changing form, neverending, constantly renewed. The energy that makes you what you are.

Such was the message carried into my face by the warm and rainy wind last St. Patrick's Day morning. Barbara Bennett and Lynne Hughes raised their beautiful voices to raise us up. Like St. Patrick, they immigrated to a strange land. We are richer for their having made Nevada their home, for having passed this way, for converting what mattered into pure energy for our future.

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