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STANDARDS BLOG:

From the Ridiculous to the Sublime

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Long-time readers will know that whenever I can, I disappear into the desert for as long as I can. Often, the opportunity arises as a result of a business trip, and so it is that I write this in northwestern Arizona a few days after spending a day at a standards client meeting in a conference room buried deep within the bowels of the raucous, random, blaring, unworldly nonsense that is otherwise known as the Mandalay Bay Casino and Resort, Las Vegas, Nevada.

Some of the nonsense worked to my favor, or at least amusement, as my \$143.95 room reservation was unexpectedly traded up into a penthouse suite on the 62nd floor of the hotel – a suite that was bigger than the entire first floor of my admittedly small house, with 18 foot ceilings (the room, not my house), a wall of glass behind two sets of motorized drapes, a bar, living room, two bathrooms (one palatial), four flat screen TV sets (more than I have owned of any type in my entire life), and no coffee maker.

But the rest of the complex was just acres and acres (and *acres* and *acres*) of slot machines, jumbled together restaurants, vast conference rooms and halls, and the worst signage on the face of the planet, both inside and out. Applying logic, the only rational explanation is that the hotel security guards must spice up their tedious days staring at surveillance screens by randomly switching the arrows on signs to destinations such as “registration.”

What a hoot it must be tracking hapless guests as they spiral endlessly about the enormous gaming hall from camera to camera, heavy suitcases in tow, wandering desperately amid the flashing lights and thunderous din looking for the sanctuary of the check-in lobby. One imagines the guards sitting there, laughing and betting on how many times they can trick this tired Kansan or that to circle the casino floor before finally stumbling, exhausted and desperate, through the only narrow (and naturally unmarked) exit that allows escape into the lobby.

Needless to say, the desert was looking pretty good by the time I escaped from the hotel myself in a four wheel drive car, heading south, and then east, on dirt roads that turned into jeep tracks as they wound into rugged, dry mountains graced with a blush of late spring flowers and the first cactus blossoms of the season.

The weather was fine, and my relief palpable by the time I set up camp, and watched the colors of the sunset flare up in the western sky, and transform grandly, then subtly, and at last imperceptibly into a faint yellow aura silhouetting the high crags of the surrounding mountains, as Rigel and Betelgeuse, and then a host of other stars, silently emerged from the gathering dark of a crystalline, moonless night. Happily, Vegas was too far over the horizon for even it's prodigious candle power to intrude in the distance and wash out the thousands of stars that were glowing into view.

For which I was quite grateful. I am a light sleeper, and one of my quiet pleasures in the fresh, clear air of a high desert night is watch the constellations wheel overhead when I wake up, and gauge the time by the location of those that I can recognize. Majestically, the earth's rotation makes them seem to slowly rise and transit the vault of the impeccably dark, desert sky as the earth hurtles soundlessly underneath.



After such a night and no matter how fitfully I may have slept, I wake up not so much refreshed as restored. And the sound and fury of Las Vegas seems impossibly, but thankfully, far away

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