



Do you know the way to Jerome?

By Sue Mayfield-Geiger

In 1997, I was living in a small garage apartment on Todville Road in my very first empty nest. Kids grown, single, ready for my AARP membership, I was free. I had written a poem about finding my place in life, and had it framed and hanging for all to see when they entered my tiny abode. It contained words like, “golden glows,” “prickly stars,” “glittery toe rings,” “swirling water,” “enchanted oasis,” and just about every hyperbole you can imagine. Later, a college professor read it and said, “Tone it down.” I did (like a good soldier). But later thought, *Why tone down the hyperboles in life?* Hyperbole (meaning exaggeration, overstatement) is even fun to say (hy-PER-bo-lee).

A short time later, I met a guy traveling through this area on his way to Jerome, Arizona. He was a poet. Of course, he had other credentials, but poet was the occupation he enjoyed most. Although I only spent a few hours with this individual, I gathered tremendous insight about a lot of things. He had a mop of curly hair that had not seen a comb in decades, an unruly beard, gnarly eyebrows, and a protruding belly that hung over his worn-out jeans.

Within two hours, I knew the story of his life. He had lived in 14 towns, cities and ranches before he was 13, joined the Army at 17, experienced Vietnam, became a registered nurse, subsequently living in six more states and 27 more towns, then traveling for an extended period throughout Europe. Back in the states, he sought direction, and decided he would move to Jerome, Arizona (pop. 400).

Jerome, Arizona? What could entice a man with an obvious “loose foot” to finally pick one spot and stay there? Particularly a town of just 400? Here was a man who had dined with kings and swum in most of the seven seas. He lodged in Italian villas, drank beer in Germany, and gazed at the Alps. But he also punched cows in Texas, worked as a butcher’s scullion on a passenger liner bound for Hawaii and the Orient, worked at various nursing jobs (mainly in the critical care unit of hospitals) and subsequently owned a print shop, a stained glass studio and the only grocery store in Roaring Springs, Texas. Now he was headed for Jerome, Arizona, and last I heard, is still there. Like an Aesop Fable, the moral of this story is simple. We often have to take many journeys in life before we find our way. And some of us never do. But, that’s okay. After all, it is the journey, not the destination that matters.

From Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled* to Judith Cameron’s *The Artist’s Way* to Ram Dass’s *Finding and Exploring Your Spiritual Path*, what hasn’t been written about soul searching? Yet no matter how many books we delve into, we are always hungry for more. Non-fiction books make up 90% of total book sales. The most popular categories are “how to” and “self-help.” As human beings, we are basically fragile creatures. We get caught up in daily routines and busy ourselves into a frenzy of complicated tasks. We work hard, we play hard, we put out fires. We question the why of it all – especially when everything

seems to come down on us in one fell swoop. So, we find ways to calm ourselves, understand the meaning of it all, get a grip. That is why we have golf courses, movie theaters, spas – places to escape. Somehow, when we remove ourselves from the irritants of life, we refresh, regroup, recharge. A yoga class, a weekend pottery retreat, a Caribbean cruise, even a permanent change in residence all contribute to soothing the inner self.

Which brings me back to the poet. Did he find everlasting happiness? Was Jerome the cure-all and the answer to his prayers? I decided to let Google give me some answers.

Yep, there he was. Living large, still writing poetry and now dabbling in photography. A member in good standing of the Jerome Artists Cooperative, his photo shows a lot of gray in the still bushy, curly hair and beard.

The smile is unchanged – broad and happy. The Jerome Artists Cooperative is housed in the old Hotel Jerome, a 1917 relic that is known for being the largest poured concrete building in America at the time of its construction. At 5,200 ft. and located between Flagstaff and Prescott, Jerome

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(founded in 1876) sits above what was the largest copper mine in Arizona and produced an astonishing three million pounds of copper per month. Boasting a population of 15,000 in the 1920s, men and women from all over the world made their way to Jerome to find work. Today the mines are silent, and according to their website, Jerome has become just another ghost town in America. Or has it?

Jerome is currently home to artists, writers, merchants, hippies and restaurateurs. They even have a winery. It features over 30 uniquely handcrafted, individually distinct, wines (they have their own website). There are old mines to explore, and nearby points of interest include Tuzigoot and Montezuma Castle National Monuments. The surrounding national forests also provide abundant opportunities for hiking, camping, fishing and hunting. Hmm...ghost town?

I thought about contacting Mr. Jerome for this article, but decided to respect his privacy and let him live and let live in his corner of utopia. Chances are he would not have a clue as to who I was or how a short visit with a total stranger affected my own artist's path and forward journey. I was in awe of someone who had done so much, seen so many things, and was still out there looking. I do remember him telling me that if Jerome was not where he was supposed to be, he'd just keep moving on. And although that obviously did not happen, I have a feeling that this is probably not his last destination in life. Because after all, it's about the journey. ☐

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