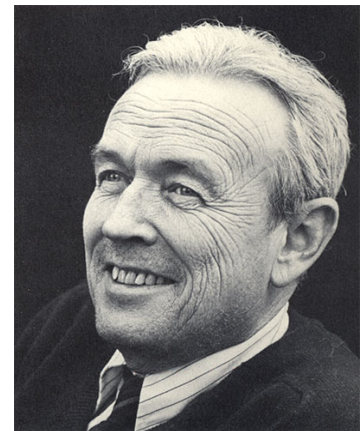


Promise

AUTHOR, MONTANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY pioneer, history professor K. Ross Toole would taunt his students saying *go ahead. Leave Montana. See what the rest of the world has to offer. You'll be back.* He used to get to say that to a lot of young people, myself included. His *Montana and the West* course was offered in the cavernous University Theater at Missoula.

I did leave. Only a few weeks after our second child was born in Havre we moved to Lewiston, Idaho, and then pursued a career that would take us in a great circle leading ultimately back here. That newborn child, my son Dylan, now is 24 years old. He can claim to have been born in Montana but until a year ago when we returned he couldn't claim residency. He and I drove out here together early last summer from Minnesota. He was not poring over a book or playing a video game. He was seeing. Excited that he was coming here. And I was seeing too this place with new eyes, new wonder and new love. Though I am not a native Montanan (I was born and raised in Pennsylvania) this is the place in which I became a person. This is the place in which imagination reached out and found no boundaries; where I breathed and didn't choke on the airborne effluent of the nearby steel mill or chemical factory. Now it looks grander even though the mountains are no taller.



K. Ross Toole | 1920 - 1981

Following our happy return to Montana my vision has quickly evolved. The state has made great progress over the decades. The population has jumped a bit to 900 thousand something from 750 thousand back in the Day. But there is so much that needs to be done. With one of the greatest wildlife resources in North America, the Montana Audubon Society has about six employees. It's counterpart in California has hundreds. Habitat for Humanity Mid Yellowstone is building two or three houses a year. No small

achievement. But the need for affordable housing in Yellowstone County is sobering. Big Brothers Big Sisters of Helena serves just under 400 young people, an achievement over 40 years of growth. But research they cite illustrates they are meeting only a fraction of the need. There is so much that CAN be done. And philanthropy can help.

THIS IS THE TIME for small to medium sized nonprofits in Montana to graduate. Special events, annual funds, raffles, foundation grants cannot begin to meet the gaping need that has been made evident to me in conversations with executive directors and their board members. Organizations such as those mentioned above deliver great value for every dollar invested through philanthropy. They have the capacity to do so much more. Money is standing in their way.

In California's urban areas the local food bank or homeless shelter are seeking to hire major and planned gift professionals. Even in this down economy there remains a shortage of development talent because many smaller organizations have come to realize what they can do in partnership with the right backers. True, there is more money in California and, of course, many, many more people (the city of San Jose having a larger population than the entire state of Montana). On the other hand, addressing the great needs in California will take billions. The problems are overwhelming. Here in Montana is different. A major gift in Montana can move, well, mountains.

WE CAN SAVE critical bird habitat in Montana. It won't cost that much. We can see that every child who needs one can have a Big Brother or Big Sister in Helena or Butte. We can assure that persons with disabilities in Billings will have access to world class recreational facilities. The orchestra can reach more school children. We can improve forest management; protect our rivers; feed more hungry families; increase alternative transportation options. These things are within the collective grasp of our prospective partners. But we have to show them how. We have to find them first; help them to get to know us; demonstrate our ability to have an impact on the problem; create opportunities through which they can become a part of the solution.

This is not so grandiose a notion.

It won't happen overnight. But it will never happen if we don't get started.

The struggle in Montana has always been about money. All of our institutions are starved for it in different degrees. They were in the 70s and 80s and they are today. University faculty members, nonprofit staff members, executive directors are stretched thin and seriously underpaid. But never have I seen such determined people. Such a strong sense of mission. Doing so much with the resources at hand. Open the spigot a bit and see great things happening. Water and money are scarce in the West and we know here how to do much with what we have.

Philanthropy can make the desert bloom. But the non profit sector has to lead the way. It can't happen by itself.

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