

My joyous baptism of fire . . .

The London Daily Mail, Bel Mooney, September 19, 2008

Exactly a week ago, I had an experience of beauty and harmony which will last my lifetime.

Fittingly, it was on the last night of our New England trip and we were in a formerly run-down city called Providence, in America's smallest state, Rhode Island.

We'd been told about the event called WaterFire: a whole lot of braziers lit along the middle of the river and music playing and people hanging out on the streets - 'Sounds quite fun,' I thought.



Baptism of fire: WaterFire event in Rhode Island

Nothing prepared me for a powerful work of art - a living ritual in which fire, water, sound and smell all play a part to reduce you to awestruck silence and (in my case) tears of joy, all for free.

This celebration of renewal takes place regularly through summer and autumn. On the day of a WaterFire event, volunteers begin at 6am setting a hundred fires in braziers strung like a necklace along the river.

Speakers are hung from the walls along the water, extra lighting provided in dark underpasses, and so on - no room here to describe the complexity of this regular installation. (Find out more at www.waterfire.org)

At sunset, the streets are thronged: all ages, all races. A gong is struck and the braziers lit in turn.

At the same time the music starts, no piece lasting more than about five minutes, and ranging from folksong, through classical to world and 'new age' - but all haunting and uplifting.

It all goes on until after midnight. We took a boat along the fires, breathing the sweet scent of cedar and gazing up at the faces of the thousands watching WaterFire.

This was when it hit me. There was such quiet delight in those crowds: no rowdiness, no squawks of derision when opera suddenly floated across the water, no shrieking drunks (no alcohol allowed except in a designated food area).

The people rose to the magic of the event. Which proves my innate belief that the best is possible.

I'm a great believer in giving thanks when something wonderful happens. Sometimes I thank God, sometimes the universe - but that night, for the first time, I could (literally) thank Providence.

Bel Mooney

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