

Parading through homes, tracking the Joneses

By Christina Capecchi

Spring is almost here and the sweet home-show season is upon us! Time to inspect the Joneses' mansion and discover just how far behind we've fallen.

This month we'll be allowed to try on bigger homes for size, drooling over the amenities on our wish lists and finding new ones to add. And you can linger a little – pull open the jewelry drawer, step inside the master-bathroom shower – because the Joneses haven't moved in yet.

Last fall my husband and I joined his parents for Minnesota's Parade of Homes. We seized one of those magical October afternoons when the slanted sun makes everything glow, piled into their Lincoln and pointed it west, toward Lake Minnetonka and Minneapolis' richest suburbs. It was time to see how the other half lives.

We started at a suburban community called Locust Hills, where an empty lot had been reduced from \$650,000 to \$480,000. My father-in-law, a farmer, crinkled his face at the price.

We ended our excursion with the most expensive: an 8,000-square-foot classical home in Edina that cost \$2.4 million. I read the description from the magazine as we pulled up to the corner lot: "This spectacular custom Dream Home will melt your heart and stir your soul."

Dream Home, an official Parade of Homes term that necessitates capitalization, is code for costs-\$5-a-person-to-enter. That wasn't the only pretension awaiting us: Unlike other Parade homes, where you leave your shoes outside the front door, we were instructed to carry our shoes in a plastic bag while we toured the home.

My husband refused to be undignified by the mandate, so he stashed his sneakers in a bush.

He had the right idea. It's hard to be swept away by the make-believe Parade of Homes world and pretend this fortress is your own when you're carrying your shoes in a grocery sack.

I don't know that our souls were stirred, but we did get lost. About two-thirds of the way through it was hard to determine where we had come from, where we were headed and where my father-in-law had gone. (He was checking out the garage.)

The home was impressive, but not quite my style. A little cold.

Deep down, that's the response I was hoping for. You parade through the Joneses' home with the secret goal of spotting something, anything to critique.

You look for something that cost too much or not enough, something that would be hard to clean. So much Brazilian cherry you'd live in fear of scratching it, you'd long for a little carpet to warm your feet. So many amenities - wet bar, indoor gym - you'd never leave home, you'd become antisocial.

But parading through the Joneses' home can be risky business, at odds with the first commandment - making gods of granite - and the 10th, the prohibition against coveting a neighbor's goods. (That includes the kitchen and closet, pantry and porch.)

I want to be like my husband's aunt, who indulged neighbors in an in-depth tour of their big, new home, then smiled and offered the heartfelt remark: "We're really happy for you!"

Life is a collaboration, not a competition, and Lent is the perfect time to fast from comparisons and focus on the many blessings we do have: good friends, warm homes and a reason to step outside every now and then.

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