

Sign of the Times

by Jake Barnes

Bert and I meet every day at a par course on the edge of town and go for a walk. One day Bert is unhappy. Unhappier, I should say. Bert is not a cheerful sort. He is a Vietnam vet, and he saw some stuff over there. After a year, his colonel wanted him to reup, but he said no way, so they sent him to Mississippi. That was almost as bad, Bert says.

“The world is going to pot,” Bert says. I agree. For about a quarter mile we use politicians for target practice. Then it's the church. Then I complain that people don't read anymore. “Why should they?” Bert asks. “They got television.” I tell him he's got that right.

I say people don't talk to each anymore either. I tell him when I was a kid and my folks had people over for dinner, they'd sit around after dinner and tell stories. “Everybody had a hell of a good time,” I said.

I'm grumpy when I get in the car and go home. I poke along past the school until I get to a signal light, then turn left onto a main thoroughfare. As I go by I see five, six high school kids standing on the corner waiting for the bus. They are huddled together like a bunch of ducks, but they aren't looking at or talking to each other. They're all looking down, their fingers fluttering on their iPods.

