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An unflagging passion for our common bonds

Not so long ago, Scott Wyatt was a man chasing windmills. Today, he's a guy who just might be onto something.

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Wyatt has a thing about flags. And so, it seems, does much of the country, if not the world

After two weeks of flag waving at the Olympics, you may think you've seen just about every flag there is to see. Nope. One flag that didn't fly in Salt Lake City is the Companion Flag.

The Companion Flag is flown with another flag, and symbolizes what people everywhere have in common

This is one man's obsession. Scott Wyatt, a successful Seattle lawyer, has turned his life upside down in an effort to change what he calls "our symbolic landscape."

It started with a trip more than 15 years ago to what was then the Soviet Union. Instead of an "evil empire," Wyatt found people with whom he had much in common, basic human impulses such as love of children and the desire for health, knowledge, security.

Wyatt was seized by a notion that wouldn't let go. The idea is one of elegant simplicity: Embrace a universal paradox by flying two flags, one that celebrates our differences and one that acknowledges our commonality.

The Olympic flag serves that purpose, but only in a limited way. It flies among flags of many nations, those traditional symbols of national pride, and represents the cross-border transcendence of athletic competition.

The Companion Flag is a more expansive view of commonality. If Wyatt could make his dream come true, the Companion Flag would become as ubiquitous a part of any nation's symbolic landscape as its national flag.

The idea nagged at Wyatt until, in 1997, he "had a personal revelation. I couldn't let go of this idea," he told me, "and I didn't want to die disappointed."

With the support of his wife, Rochelle, a technology manager at the Seattle Public Library, he quit his law practice and embarked on an improbable crusade.

I met Scott and Rochelle for breakfast recently. I was intrigued, and somewhat bemused, by the story he had told me via e-mail and by the Companion Flag Web site (www.companionflag.org). Was this guy for real? Was he a flaky idealist, genuine visionary, or some combination?

Wyatt is an idealist, but not a flake. A boyish enthusiasm masks the intensity of his dedication to the Companion Flag endeavor. Some will brand him an eccentric with no chance of changing anything. Knowing that prevented him

from launching the flag project all those years.

"Now, it's all very realistic," he said, as Rochelle nodded in agreement.

Companion Flags may not have been flying at the Salt Lake Olympics, but they are flying around the world, including in Russia, Israel, London, British Columbia and Seattle.

You'll know it when you see it. The Companion Flag is a simple white banner with a colored stripe along the top that matches a color in the host flag. It is always flown below the host flag, and never flies solo.

Wyatt has scaled back from his first scattered efforts, which took him around the globe pitching the Companion Flag and offering conflict-resolution conferences. Last fall, he created a non-profit organization, recruited a board of directors and developed a plan focused on schools in Washington state.

Wyatt is an earnest idealist, a man with great enthusiasm and no apparent cynicism. But he's no fool. And thank goodness for that. Messing around with a symbol as powerful as a flag is not for the foolhardy.

In this hyperpolitical time, hidden agendas are always assumed. Is the Companion Flag a new wave of the peace movement? Is it a backlash to gains made on behalf of diversity (it is white, after all)? Is it a new form of political correctness?

This is not about politics or agendas, Wyatt insists. The goal of the Companion Flag project is simply this: Sustain awareness of what we have in common and people will naturally be more compassionate.

Who can argue with that? After our breakfast in a North Seattle neighborhood, Wyatt gave me a Companion Flag lapel pin. I wear it.

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