



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

Speed wobbles

Once, while attending a summer program for young students at UC Santa Barbara, I attempted to skateboard down a long, sloping hill. I had no business doing that. I was not a skateboarder. Where I hailed from in the outback corner of northern California skateboarding was not a thing — because it is very difficult to skateboard on dirt roads. But I tried anyway. I stepped aboard and went merrily down the path until, and quite suddenly, the skateboard developed speed wobbles, became uncontrollable, and I was tossed unceremoniously — and I'm sure hilariously — into the grass.

The skateboard went shooting off into the bushes like a dud missile while I lay impaled, and writhing, on a lawn sprinkler.

Ever-after I have been mindful of speed wobbles.

In Trout Fishing in America, Richard Brautigan observed, rather optimistically, that no winter spent in an insane asylum could be counted as a total loss. There would be, he pointed out,

“television, clean sheets on soft beds, hamburger gravy over mashed potatoes, a dance once a week with the lady cooks, clean clothes, a locked razor and lovely young student nurses.”

Lately — by which I mean every single day — I admit to difficulty in warding off the notion that we have, collectively, checked ourselves into a nuthouse.

There is, for example, the Russian question, which appears to be more and more of a political and journalistic fidget-spinner — a three-sided toy that keeps going nowhere even as it goes faster and faster and amazes the children. There is the continued hand-wringing over who uses what bathroom, spectacular millennial meltdowns on the quad, Nancy Pelosi, parents in Ohio and Florida putting their children in dog kennels, male rompers, manties, now mantyhose, even.

There are the druids of climate science, endlessly declaring the apocalypse and flagellating themselves in parade. There is that army of attorneys and professors endlessly bullwhipping the peasant class with their limitless expertise and remarkable lack of self-awareness. There is the enduring mystery of Jerry Brown, Nancy Pelosi, that weird Rasputin in the White House named Steve Bannon, environmental zealots who leave hundreds of tons of garbage and dead dogs behind their protests, eyebrow shaving and suicidal behavior over whether or not to install stop lights or roundabouts, great white sharks eating babies in Wal-Mart, fentanyl lollipops,

and masked truckers driving their Peterbilts through the Moonlight Bunny Ranch.

Probably none of this hyperbole is new to humanity, and I'm certainly not suggesting our times are somehow worse than they were in, say, Atlanta after Sherman was finished. But I would argue strongly that somehow the frictions of our time often feel manufactured out of the sheer boredom afforded by luxury. They get built like a coal fire in a steam engine, and continually stoked by the 10-minute news cycle for purposes other than identifying and solving actual problems. Even as I write that I can hear the teeth gnashing and garment rending.

And the train just keeps hauling ass down the tracks, even as nobody knows — though they all claim they do — where it is actually headed.

Also, none of it will help me grow more apples, a better crop of green beans, or encourage more flexion in my colt's neck, which are things I spend far more time worrying about.

In his marvelous book, *Sapiens*, Yuval Noah Harari writes:

“...despite the astonishing things that humans are capable of doing, we remain unsure of our goals and we seem to be as discontented as ever. We have advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships to space shuttles — but nobody knows where we're going. We are more powerful than ever before, but have very little idea what to do with all that power. Worse still, humans seem to be more irresponsible than ever.

Self-made gods with only the laws of physics to keep us company, we are accountable to no one.”

We have the speed wobbles, but at least we know how to make glow-in-the-dark bunny rabbits.

On the political end, I've mostly capitulated. On the national and state level I really don't care who wins or loses because my candidate always loses — I voted for Jim Webb — and I have stopped trusting any of them. I simply don't believe they are high-minded public servants out for the greater good. Any of them. I think they all have their heads buried rather deep in the trough and enjoy absolving themselves from laws the rest of us have to live by.

Rather, I prefer to focus on being a good citizen entirely within my own community. With abundant justification I now view the entire political class the same way I look at striped apes leaping around in a zoo.

For the record, despite the high-and-right outrage of several readers of this column, I believe in climate change, and always have. I just don't believe most of the people who compose the more zealous cadre of the climate

church deaconry are actually willing to give up their cars, their cell phones, their computers, their bicycles, or anything else that requires intensive mining, exploitation of fossil fuels, and ultimately, anything that will cause them actual sacrifice to solve it — and mostly I despise the piety.

So, ultimately, for me, it's about living just practically enough, lightly enough, and personally honest enough to stay out of Brautigan's asylum, where so many of the hyperbole Jesuits seem to reside.

Which brings me back to that skateboard. I got on it. It was going too fast. I probably could have stopped, picked it up, and spent a little more time figuring out how I was going to properly negotiate the hill before I crashed and hurt myself. But I didn't.

Lesson learned.

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