



The Bunkhouse Chronicle

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Columnist

The shoulder season

"Lord, let me die but not die

Out."
— James Dickey, *"For the Last Wolverine"*

A few weeks ago, on our way to the End of Summer Concert and Barbecue at the Camp Sherman Store, my wife and I crossed paths with a bear. He wasn't a big bear, probably not much more than a yearling boar, and we surprised him at whatever he was doing. He lumbered a few yards into the brush, then stopped, sniffed the air, and sat by a rotten stump. We stopped too, and for a long time the three of us just sat there studying each other.

Maybe it was the smoke, or the heat, or the way the bear sat panting as he

watched us, but I had what alcoholics call a "moment of clarity," a brief window of comprehension that stayed with me long after.

For whatever reason, I thought of Hiro Onoda. Onoda, who refused to believe that Japan had lost the Second World War, finally came out of the Philippine jungle in 1974, almost 30 years late, and only after his former commander was flown in from Japan to formally relieve him from duty.

ODFW estimates that there are 25-30,000 black bears living in Oregon, which is greatly encouraging, if you believe them. But based on what we know about post-industrial human behavior, and how the chart lines of human domination and the success of other species travel in opposite directions, it may not be too far-fetched to think that in the lifetimes of our children, or our grandchildren, seeing a bear in the woods at all may be more the stuff of Onoda's surrender than a realistic expectation.

I don't think that's too dramatic. The last documented grizzly bear in Oregon was killed on September 14, 1931, near Chesimnus Creek, in the Wallawas. That really wasn't very long ago. And the sad truth about it is really much worse, given that the last Grizzly bear in Oregon

likely never surrendered, and probably died utterly alone, unknown to anyone.

And how could Lewis and Clark, who witnessed bison by the tens of thousands, believe that within 75 years of their journey some 60 million bison would have been hunted to near extinction?

I'm not pointing fingers. As a young man I would hide in the giant haystacks of one ranch or another, working a rabbit call and cradling a rifle. My friends and I would sit for hours in the cold, glassing the desert and calling coyotes in over the snow — so we could shoot them. We never, to the best of my memory, gave any serious thought to the rightness or the wrongness of it all. If anything, we thought we were doing a bit for predator control because coyotes can be truly vicious. Among other appalling spectacles, I've seen them encircle a calving cow and drag the calf from her body even as she tried gallantly to fight off a snarling pack of murderous midwives.

But today, in my personal shoulder season — that odd space between old understandings and the search for new ones — I'm looking for ways to accommodate rather than kill, and I worry that my behavior wasn't much better than the garimpeiros in Peru and Brazil who, for the sake

of minerals, routinely murder human beings.

Nothing says "Modern Man" quite like shooting our primitive and defenseless cousins for profit.

We've seen that before, too. Settlers in the country where I was raised thought nothing of taking random potshots at Paiutes or Maidus, or Bannock and Pit River natives who were usually starving, and sick, had no means to defend themselves, and were simply travelling on the wagon road.

What's more disturbing is that in some way, with only rare exceptions, we have inherited the mindset. We are part of that lineage because we are, in a direct sense, part of the horrors in the Congo, where children are forced at gunpoint to dig up minerals such as coltan for our cell phones and computers by hand.

I know a lot of people who think that is wrong, but I don't know a single person who is willing to give up their cell phone or computer so that kids in the Congo don't have to do that sort of thing, or who would trade the comparative comfort and convenience of modern American life to help stop the slaughter of stone-age tribes in Amazonia. We couldn't even manage that kind of decency in our own

backyard. And these days we mostly don't see it, so it's far easier to rationalize those concerns away and to invest emotionally and financially in the anodynes that ultimately serve only to preserve the disease.

Again, I'm not moralizing here; I place myself firmly, inescapably, in the ranks of the consumer. This is simply the dichotomous web of modern life, and the more we struggle against it, the deeper, it seems, we are caught.

"Things reveal themselves passing away," wrote Yeats. That's true, but only if we are paying attention. Hiro Onoda revealed himself in the last sad act of a war for domination, resources, and lebensraum that consumed the world, and a few weeks ago a bear revealed himself to us in the under-logged woods of Oregon.

He wasn't the last bear, not yet, and he's fighting a war for resources that he isn't even aware of, but somehow I think these things — the bear, the natives, the minerals, and Onoda, are all related. In fact I know they are related, in the same way that I know the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, spilled out onto a table, somehow, eventually, with the due diligence that is our responsibility, fit together into a much larger picture.





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