

From the editor’s desk

I’m good with going virtual

I’m sure I’ve mentioned this before, but I’m a fan of science fiction. You can see my love of the genre throughout my apartment.

The “2001: A Space Odyssey” poster from Japan (thanks to a dear friend), boxes of comic books, the numerous plastic models from the Terminator 2 Hunter Killer Tank to the Battlestar Galactica, and the collection of action figures (probably around 200 or so and growing at a rate I question whether I can sustain) — all of that makes me a nerd. I’m good with that.

FROM THE EDITOR



**PHIL
WRIGHT**
OBSERVER EDITOR

Don’t let the name fool you. This is no mere or even big comic book convention. Comic-Con has evolved into the largest pop culture festival in the world. Toymakers produce exclusive items available only at the annual convention. Major Hollywood studios reveal their blockbusters there. But the real highlights are the guest panels, where filmmakers, actors, writers, producers and other stars of pop culture take to stages to reveal their upcoming projects or simply engage in a Q&A with the audience.

I’ve never gone to Comic-Con. And due to the COVID-19 pandemic, no one gets to go this year.

Instead, I and nerds and anyone else can attend Comic-Con @ Home, which began Wednesday. And those panels — all 350 of them — are going to be available for free on the official Comic-Con YouTube page: www.youtube.com/user/ComicCon.

I’m so good with that.

The virus and how we are dealing with it has disrupted our lives in so many ways. But it also has revealed ways we can connect to one another.

Once-in-a-while virtual meetings have become just another part of the workday. The video conferencing app Zoom has become so popular we now say things like, “I’m Zooming this afternoon.” Doctors see patients via telemedicine. Choirs and bands provide virtual concerts in real time (that sounds like science fiction right there).

The brains behind La Grande’s creative performance space, hq, have joined the virtual revolution, just like Peak Lifestyle Studio and Loveland Funeral Chapel and other local businesses and nonprofits. While the coronavirus is not going away, the pandemic will. But our need to connect to others is not going away, and thus going virtual will stay part of our lives from now on.

Science fiction has proposed this in one form or another for decades. Meetings where people don’t leave their homes and instead participate via a holographic projection, for example. But we find we don’t even need that kind of tech. We just need a big enough monitor to see everyone at the meeting.

And I can’t help but think there can be substantial cost savings from this tech. Some state agencies, for example, require regular meetings of all their employees to gather in one place, usually Portland or Bend. All that comes with travel costs — gas, food and lodging. Not cheap.

Making those big meetings virtual, however, should cut down on those costs, maybe save the state — and therefore the public — a little money.

Yeah, I’m good with that, too.

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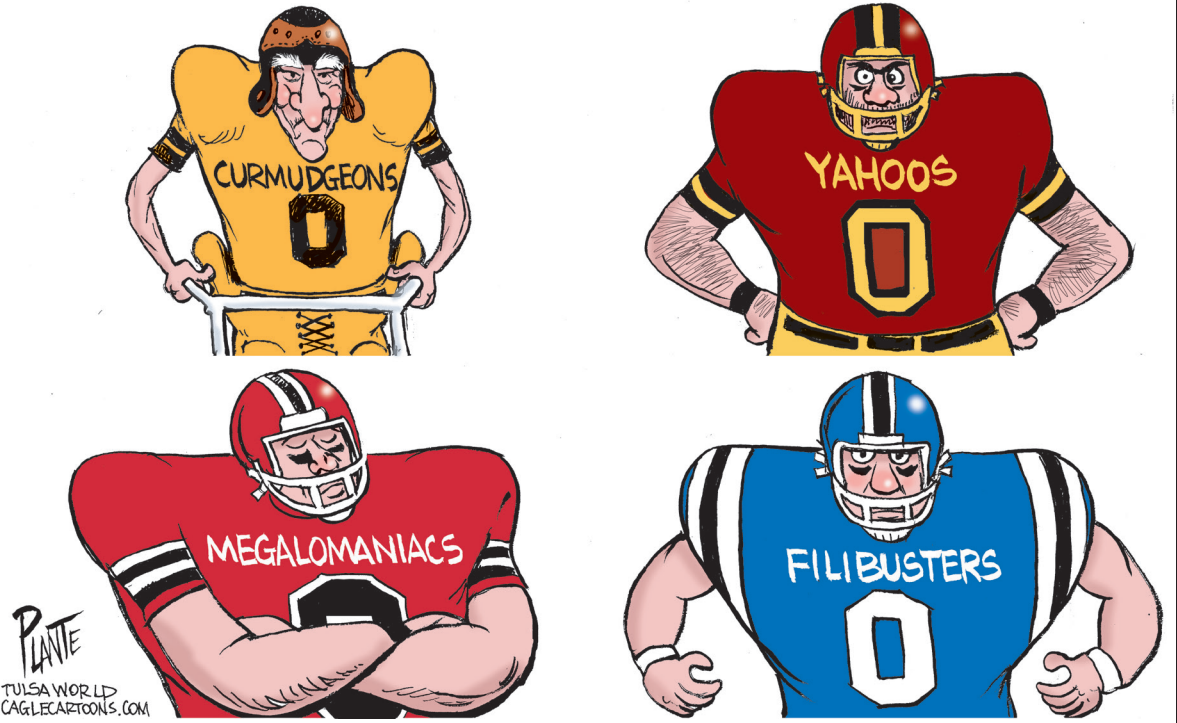
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Other views

Time to take pen in hand

I can’t recall the last time I wrote or received a handwritten letter, but it’s time to send such letters again.

The reasons why the handwritten letter died are obvious: email, text messaging and cell phones. With how quick those innovations make whipping off a note, why would anybody take an hour to hand-write one?

But how much better off might we be if we started sending such letters again?

I’ve kept every handwritten letter I ever got, in boxes in my attic. One Saturday in 2000, when I was moving from Pittsburgh to Washington, D.C., organizing and storing stuff soured my mood.

Until I stumbled upon a handwritten letter I’d received in 1985.

It was from a fellow I’d gone to Penn State with, who’d become an editor in Bangor, Maine. As I read it that Saturday in 2000, it took me back 15 years — to exactly who I was at age 24. I laughed out loud reading it.

I also found a stack of pink envelopes from two ladies, Bonnie and Tracey, who attended the same college as my friend Griff. An anonymous letter he had them send me during our freshman year in 1980 led to a robust correspondence, and I dated Bonnie for a spell after we graduated. Rereading those letters that Saturday in 2000, I laughed so hard that tears tum-

OTHER VIEWS



**TOM
PURCELL**
COLUMNIST

bled down my face.

The handwritten letter is personal and deeply satisfying in ways that electronic communication will never be. Email, no matter how well crafted, simply isn’t memorable.

Consider a letter my grandfather hand-wrote on Nov. 28, 1928.

With great eloquence, he consoled his best friend’s wife on the loss of her mother. He wrote that letter when he was 25 — nine years before my father’s birth. My grandfather died when my father was only 3. That letter is among the most cherished items I have from a grandfather I never got to meet.

Now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the handwritten letter has begun a comeback. Miss Manners and others encourage writing to thank the many people battling the virus on the front lines.

They also suggest writing to elderly nursing-home residents and others who’ve been isolated and shut in for months — because simple kindness and compassion can benefit both writer and recipient in these unusual times.

Could the handwritten letter help us address deeper challenges, too? Instead of posting strident snark on social media, why not take time to think things through and explain your viewpoint to a movement leader, a mayor or anyone else unaccustomed to receiving thoughtful, heartfelt letters?

Writing by hand calms the thinking process. It brings out our better angels. It helps convey clarity and bring understanding to complex matters.

I’ll bet writing by hand would help letters’ senders and recipients alike begin to realize they have more in common than not — that our communities are not as divided as we may think. Most simply have different ideas for achieving the outcomes we all desire.

We won’t know until we try. So, pick up a ballpoint pen and write some “thank you” cards to people who’ve sacrificed for all of us during the pandemic. Then write some memoranda, uplifting letters to folks who’ve suffered in isolation for months.

That’s a good start, anyhow.

About the Author

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