

AMAZON TRAIL

Still learning

*Time heals wounds; every stereotype masks exceptions—
these are just two of the lessons life teaches for free*

by Lee Lynch

Drivers are waving to me again. I used to enjoy that connection with neighbors as I strode along my road. Most of the time I can't see beyond the windshield glare to recognize the greeters, and when I can, often haven't a clue who they might be. It's just a friendly country custom I recall from adolescent vacations in New Hampshire, and I've always liked the feeling of goodwill.

When the anti-gay ballot wars were raging, no one waved. I took to walking head down, eyes staring at asphalt, trying to be the invisible queer. Years later the pall has finally lifted and I wave cheerfully back—a far cry from the day a car swerved to intimidate me into a ditch.

I've learned a lot in my middle years. I didn't exactly want to learn any of it, but learn I have. And this has been one lesson: Life is made up of cycles. When the neighbors stop waving, wait a few years.

A local cultural pillar who's fought hard to keep our library open and stocked with intelligent (and sometimes banned) books, hugged me twice last week after I told her I was moving away. She

against gays. She told me how she was shunned at her tiny community church for her friendship with the gay men and her refusal to support anti-gay politics.

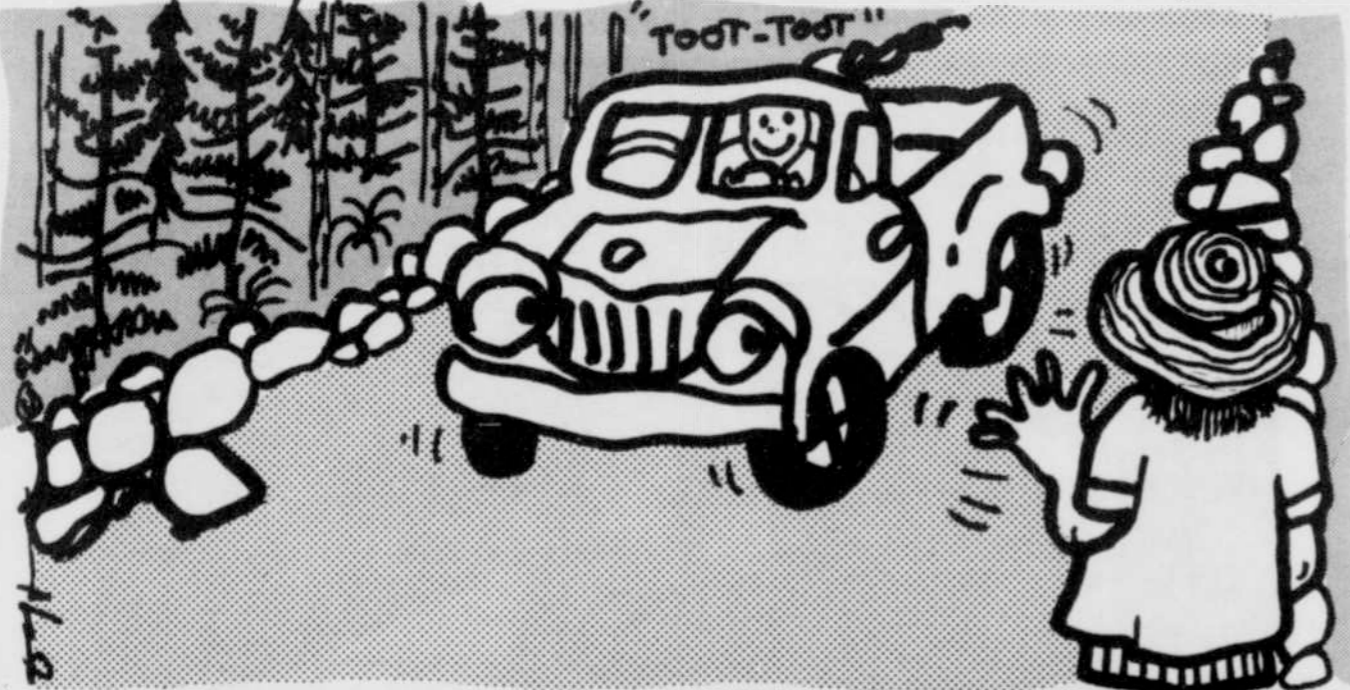
I thought her advocacy came from knowing the guys and us, but no, it sprang from her religion. "The Bible," she explained, "says it's not for me to judge. That's the Lord's job."

I'd always been impressed by Meggie's courage. Now I stood awed by her fundamental faith and her humility. Bless the true Christians.

Speaking of my intolerance, I learned what an obstinately intolerant person I can be. I once proudly wore a pin: "Friends don't let friends vote Republican."

Then I met Nadine. She looked and acted the way I imagined a strait-laced, well-off Episcopal-church-lady Republican matron would look and act. But she kept coming to these human rights meetings. And volunteering for whatever needed doing. And doing it.

One evening I guess the Republican-bashing got a little out of hand. Nadine quietly, politely, from an inconspicuous corner of the room, volunteered, "I'm a Republican." She gave a self-



helped me to realize another lesson I've learned: I'm as good as anybody!

It took me this long to learn that if I want something to thrive—if I want to thrive—I need to be part of that something. Maybe I can give money, phone bank, lobby politicians, do grunt work like shelving books.

Before I became part of the solution, I was intimidated by that local cultural pillar, as if she were some kind of celebrity. I've learned that I have something significant to contribute to the world, no matter how small the contribution or how small my world. Giving has been my key to shedding a poor self-image. And double hugs are just one of my rewards.

I've scorned organized religion since childhood, when I spent too many Sunday mornings in little-girl drag, sitting or kneeling on furniture designed to hurt, wondering what in hell those men in skirts or tight collars got out of alternating between threatening and boring their listeners.

With religion the backbone of the assault on gay Oregonians, my scorn increased. I came to despise Christians who sat so meekly on Sundays, then turned on their neighbors during the week.

Then I met Meggie. She's a fundamentalist Christian introduced to us by two gay men. And as one of the men slipped away from this world with AIDS, Meggie was with him until the end.

Our work brought Meggie and I together a few hours a week. She listened to me rant about my oppression as a queer. She never said a word

conscious, but not self-deprecating laugh and her face flushed. "There are a lot of us who don't agree with our party's social policies."

I've never worn that pin again.

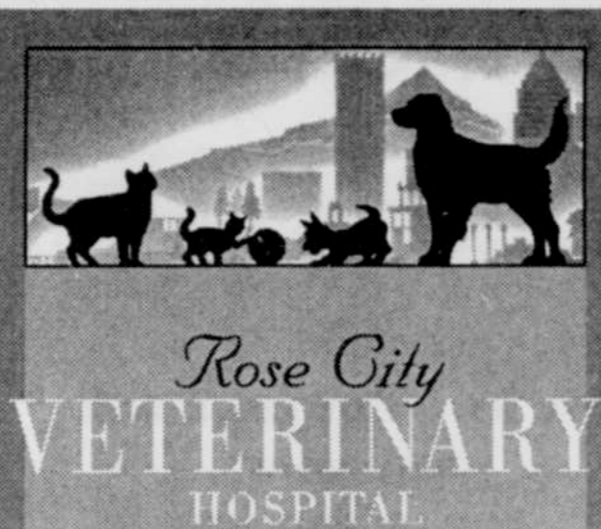
When I moved west I thought life would get easier. In New Haven I was a rodent on a wheel, going round and round and stopping only to eat and sleep. Here on the West Coast I planned to learn to be mellow and laid back. I'd live a simpler, less materialistic existence that would require less money and less work.

Immediately, I planted a garden (which never produced), picked blackberries, split wood, made my own applesauce, went for long hikes, got hired on at four jobs in about as many months (and accepted three), began a monthly column, published a book a year, ended a relationship, started a new one, met scores of lesbians, found outlets for book reviews to build my lesbian and gay library—you get the picture.

After 10 years of this I broke down, just as I had back east. Only now moving to the mellow West Coast wasn't the solution. I had brought my Type A skin along with me, and it was time to shed it.

I've become very attached to the couch. My Higher Power even gave me feet problems so I could learn to move s-l-o-w-l-y. When I don't, I fall right over. Rest, I've learned, is not a waste of time.

This list of the simple lessons of my midlife could go on and on. And will, I trust, as I go on and on learning.



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