

Dear Uncle Mike,

After moving to Oregon from Iowa, relatives are asking if I've seen a Sasquatch. Despite several near glimpses among the denizens of downtown Portland, I cannot say that I've actually seen the big-footed bugger. How about you? Have you ever seen a Big-Foot? Ever attend a Sasquatch Potlatch?

Ned, the Iowa Boy

Dear Ned,

No, Uncle Mike has never seen a sasquatch. But then, he's never seen Iowa either. He saw Kansas once, but it's been so long ago it might not be as frightening as he remembers. Uncle Mike is intrigued by your near sightings in downtown Portland and as soon as you and your therapist sort out the details, he'd love not to know them. Should your luck change (for better or worse, depending upon the circumstances), Uncle Mike would recommend you not greet him or her with a hearty midwest, "Hey, you big footed bugger." Sasquatches are fairly laid back, but treated with disrespect, their behavior is probably every bit as abominable as any snowman in Tibet. Which explains why Uncle Mike has never attended a potlatch thrown in their honor. But then, being easily horrified, he also avoids karaoke bars.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Heard you were a Blazer fan. How about these guys? I think this team is headed for greatness. What do you think?

A. Fellow Fan, Portland

Dear A.,

Uncle Mike has no idea who you've been talking to but sincerely recommends you sever your contacts.

Dear Uncle Mike,

Why do football players always slap each other's butts? If cheerleaders did that they would probably get some weird looks from the fans. What do you think?

Anonymous, Elko, Nevada

Dear Anonymous,

Before beginning, Uncle Mike wants you to know he's completely out of his depth. He doesn't know any football players, and if he did, he can't imagine knowing one well enough to ask why he slaps his team mates' butts. What does Uncle Mike think? That slapping butts is better than slamming elbows into foreheads; which, given the spirit of the game, would be much less weird. It would never occur to Uncle Mike to slap anyone's butt in front of anyone whose butt it wasn't, but he has nothing against those who do. Unless, of course, they're cheerleaders. Cheerleaders should only giggle, hold hands, and bounce up and down. Unless they're male, in which case they can head butt each other.

Dear Uncle Mike,

I am a sophomore at Elko High School, in Elko, Nevada. Our assignment is to write and ask you a question. My question is, what makes people gay? I have wondered this for a long time, and don't understand how someone can like the same sex.

Gina Micheli, Elko, Nevada

Dear Gina,

As nearly as Uncle Mike can understand, what makes people gay is the same thing that makes people straight, only different. The longer Uncle Mike observes his fellow humans, the more certain he is that sexuality is a spectrum rather than a polarity. Technicolor as opposed to black and white. Uncle Mike would encourage you to keep wondering about the roots of physical attraction. Regardless what our sexual orientations might be, the more we understand about sexual behavior, the less different anyone else's seems.

Dear Uncle Mike,

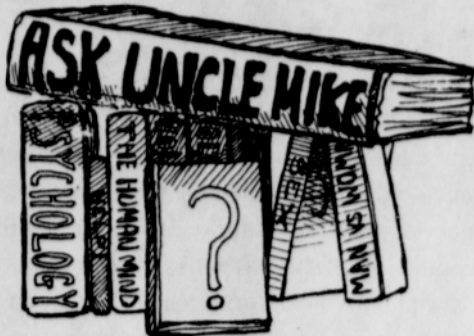
Frustrated is the only word I can think to use. My wife and I are currently building a new home. Though we have planned everything carefully, and chose our contractors with care, it seems they never show up as scheduled. Their other projects are running longer than they planned, etc., etc. The work they were to perform is holding up subsequent work, and now those subsequent contractors' schedules are filled on the new dates. I'm sorry I am rambling, and am probably only blowing off steam - but maybe you could give me a few good phrases that could be used on the delaying muffs that won't get me sued or thrown in jail.

Frustrated in Port Angeles, Washington

Dear Frustrated,

Uncle Mike forgives you for rambling, and thinks it's nothing but okay that you're blowing off steam. Uncle Mike used to share your frustration for things not going as scheduled. He feels much better since he realized that everything happens at just the right moment and the real problem was his nitwit attempt to predict a future filled with variables over which he had little or no control. He still makes plans but no longer confuses the road map with the actual trip and tries to control nothing but his own actions. As for what you might say to these irresponsible swine, it depends upon how fast you want your house built. If you're not above pouring the foundation yourself, when the little prima donnas show up with the trucks, tell them today isn't good for you and you'll get back to them when your schedule clears. At which point, they'll either sue you or react in ways that will allow you to have them thrown in jail and you and your husband can get on with assembling your yurt.

Letters to Uncle Mike: PO Box 1242, Depoe Bay, OR 97341



THERAPY PAGE

LOWER LEFT CORNER

by Victoria Stoppello

I had to yell at him, get his attention. He had his back to the surf when a particularly large wave boomed and exploded fifty yards away. He wasn't paying attention, perched on driftwood, looking up the beach toward North Head.

"Dammit, get over here and don't turn your back on the ocean." I wasn't talking to a kid, but to my husband. Like most people raised in the east, he is still fascinated by the power of the Pacific during a winter storm.

The topography near the Columbia's North Jetty has been changing almost daily. After 24 hours of windy weather, gusting to sixty, the surf is wild on a high tide, with twenty-foot waves. His fascination is counterpoised with my fear, my conservative instincts, my knowledge that people die every year, crushed by wave tossed logs. I never think "it won't happen to me" because I figure that arrogant attitude is usually what gets people in trouble.

Our different reactions mirror our different upbringings and our different experiences. As a male, he was probably raised to be more risk-taking, but the bigger difference is cultural. People on the east coast don't go to the beach much during winter; besides they don't have any driftwood anyway. Walking on the beach is a year round activity in the Northwest, but not on the Jersey shore. Their weather is influenced by the cold continental air mass, while ours is tempered by the Pacific ocean. Their winter winds are biting cold compared to ours.

People in New Jersey go to the beach for basking, swimming and bodysurfing in the warm, reliable waves of summer. A person gets tired before he gets cold in that water. So that's their paradigm of ocean. The hurricane season usually happens after families have gone home on Labor Day and no one bothers much with the beach in winter. The towns are buttoned up, businesses closed, and cottages shuttered. The boardwalk is empty and the carnies rides silent sculpture.

I've walked those boards in winter, bundled up against searing cold under gunmetal skies. It isn't pleasant. It isn't sweater and windbreaker weather. By comparison the beaches are abandoned and there are few witnesses to winter's power over the Atlantic, laid flat and angry by steady wind, cold rain or bits of snow.

But yesterday, here at home, there were a lot of us out marveling at the size of the waves and the mountains of driftwood being swept and sucked back again like proverbial match sticks.

In a few brisk storms, the ocean has swept in on the accumulation just north of the jetty, blasted it loose - asphalt, driftwood, sand dunes. What was dry land only a month ago is now submerged at high tide. The ocean is taking back what it has built over decades.

On the east coast, there's been a tendency to build to the foredune and then try to protect what's built with sea walls, groins, and revetments. There's mounting scientific opinion that these efforts have failed, that the more interventions are tried, the more the beach erodes. Most of the beaches on the eastern seaboard are barrier islands and long sand spits, sometimes barely a quarter mile wide. The natural process is for the ocean to eat away at the eastern side while flinging and washing sand landward. The islands gradually shift west.

The sea walls, in particular, interfere with this process. Millions of federal dollars have been poured into replenishing beaches and rebuilding homes and businesses damaged in storms. It's a losing battle, but one that's hard to give up.

Similar battles have been won and lost on the Oregon coast. Bayocean Spit was planned to be a grand resort in the 19th century tradition; now only a few traces of the concrete and rail lines remain. In the fifties houses at Cape Meares, one by one slid into the ocean. In the seventies, homeowners on Salishan spit appealed to the state to help them rip rap the foredune to save their houses from the ocean's incursions.

Other people laughed at the foolishness of building one's house on sand, especially sand with water on three sides.

Meanwhile, we're entertained by our winter storms, but perhaps, we're also subtly educated. The unpredictability of a Pacific storm tide makes us more cautious, respectful, and our temperate winters allow us to get out and experience it.

Maybe easterners, and city folk everywhere, should take more walks on a winter beach and see just what a stormy ocean can do. We might build differently.

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