

Coffee Talk

A chat with Terry Tempest Williams.

Environmental writer and poet Terry Tempest Williams sat at a table at the Excelsior Inn about 8 o'clock on a Friday morning a couple of weeks ago. In town to lecture and lead some writing workshops at the UO, she squeezed me into her busy schedule. Too early for me, I'd arrived at the restaurant several minutes prior just to get enough coffee down my gullet to be able to ask some questions. Williams, on the other hand, was already put together and naturally beautiful at that early hour, her unique combination of wisdom and grace readily apparent.

A lifetime resident of Utah, Williams writes from her own experiences as a Mormon woman living in that state. She has authored six books, as well as a collection of essays, *An Unspoken Hunger*, and two children's books.

Her work has been anthologized widely and reproduced in *The New Yorker*, *The Nation*, *Outside*, *Audubon* and *Orion* and she's best known for *Refuge*, a book that tells the parallel tales of the degradation of the environment and her mother's battle with cancer.

She's been inducted into the Rachel Carson Honor Roll and has received the National Wildlife Federation's Conservation Award for Special Achievement. On Friday May 2, she received an honorary doctorate from the University of Utah — a huge step for the university to make for that state's own "wayward" daughter.

The waitress arrives, and I'm ecstatic to hear Williams say, "Coffee — yes, please." So she's human.

"I love Eugene: the water, the freedom of thought, and it's the first place I drank coffee," she reveals. But it's not the coffee, it's the Pacific Yew that first introduced her to the Emerald Valley.

TTW: Shortly after my mother died, I received a call, then a letter about the Pacific Yew and its properties for healing cancer. I ignored the letter because it was too close, my grandmother had just been diagnosed with cancer as well. Then I received another letter, only this time it had a branch in it of Pacific Yew and I couldn't ignore that. I came here to walk in the woods, see the Pacific rainforest along the McKenzie and it really was life-changing.

EW: What is the most pressing environmental concern we face?

TTW: The Bush Administration. There are many forms of terrorism and environmental degradation is one of them. We're being hit on all counts. It's not enough that last month the Senate voted not to drill in the Arctic — it went back to the House floor and passed. Bush said he's going door to door himself. I believe our country is being run as a business, not as a democracy and

us out of this scenario, besides the 2004 elections? What do you think the individual can do?

TTW: Speak. Shatter the silence. Question everything. Redefine. Reimagine patriotism. Reimagine hatred and take back the language. I think we can do this each in our own ways, each with our own gifts. I realize that since Sept. 11, I've been writing mostly for newspapers. Books are too slow and they don't get read. I've wanted to be part of the dialogue and this dialogue is taking place daily and on a national and local level; that's where we are having this public discourse. It's critical that we engage in this form of democracy; it literally is happening at our kitchen table. That's an exciting thing to see. We're struggling. I'm struggling. I don't know whom to believe I don't know what to believe. And everyday I hear myself saying over and over again 'I don't know.'

We watch Saddam toppled and we're told this is in the same category as Stalin and Hitler and I think, 'Am I losing it?' But on the other hand, I believe it is an occupation. It's about American Imperialism and I do think they have their eyes on Syria, this fundamentalist government. On one hand they tell us they're liberating Iraq, and on the other hand we're watching the erosion of democracy in our own country. There's this paradox going on. I wonder how the PATRIOT act will go over in Iraq as the first document of democracy.

EW: And here?

Code Pink rally. That's certainly not something we anticipated, planned, or expected. There was a wall of Washington, DC police saying 'You cannot come into Lafayette Park' and 'No, you cannot stand in front of the White House and protest this war.' That was a week before it started. And we looked through their arms and saw pro-life protesters standing in front of the White House with ghastly images and that appeared not to be a problem. Again, the incredible irony and paradox. There is no room for diplomacy.

EW: What can citizens do who want to change this administration's priorities and agenda?

TTW: I don't know. We can vote. It seems really important that the 2004 election be held with as much integrity as possible. A great idea as given by Granny D at the Code Pink rally. She said, 'Vote absentee in your state and then become a swing state suffragette and go to the states that are close and help get the vote out.' I thought that was really smart.

She also said — again, we listen to our elders, she's what, in her 90s — she said the Green Party needs to be patient with this next election and that yes, the greens can organize locally and build up state legislatures and start from the ground up but this next election we have to try to get a democratic candidate that can defeat George Bush. Otherwise, we have four more years. I

'We need to be able to treat each other well in order to treat the animals and plants well. It's a cycle, the embrace.'

they don't understand that this is a public process. Whether it's Bush/Cheney's energy policy behind closed doors or the desire to exploit everything they possibly can on every possible level — the environment, social issues or the economy — I think it's devastating. Now there's this atmosphere of war where we aren't allowed to criticize our president. To be called a traitor or a patriot — this is one of the darkest times we've faced in this country.

EW: What light do you see that will get

TTW: I believe we are in this atmosphere of terror and that they are imposing and propagating and elevating fear to create compliance and complacency. It's all the more critical for us to be highly attentive and to really ground ourselves, to stay in the center in the thick of our lives and in the thread of our own communities. That's the only place I know where hope truly lives. And the only place we can have an impact is within our own community.

I was arrested in Washington during the

thought that was a brave thing to say. And that may be controversial, but I agree.

EW: Who would you support for the Democratic candidate?

TTW: I'm waiting. It may even be a Republican candidate. I don't know. I'm looking for someone who has a vision and who dares to speak out against these corporate ideas of democracy. I still have great faith in democracy. I have great belief in the power of community. And I also have a strong belief in dinner parties. In people's





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