

Linus and the Mantis

Observing small creatures

Lately I've found myself watching two small beings with growing affection. One has been my less-than-a-month-old grandson Linus. The second has been a preying mantis I photographed early one morning last August along Utah's Green River.

I've watched Linus with stunned amazement at how he beams pleasure before he has learned how to smile; stretches in his sleep; garners comfort from being held. As his vision has begun to focus, I see him studying faces, lights and trees for long moments, soaking in his new world.

I've also spent considerable time watching the preying mantis because its photo is on the screen of my computer as it slowly boots up. The mantis is gazing into the distance (however far that is for a mantis) while perched on the head of a boating friend. Its eyes and powerful front legs bulge from its tiny head and chest. With the previous night's rains fading, small drops of water cling to its green forelegs

As I watched both of these small creatures, I was surprised by my affection for not only Linus, but also the mantis. I found myself hoping the mantis survived until late October near its river, looking around for prey, a mate, a good place to lay its frothy egg case, or whatever else it wanted to look at.

It occurred to me that the process by which my affections have grown for both these beings may help explain why one person will be in agony over the loss of wild places and species, while another can wipe them out without a second thought. It seems to have a lot to do with whether a person has watched other species like they watch humans, and whether they have thought about their needs and wants.

Recently I spoke at a conference back East at the request of Sarah Gerould, the conference program chair. It had been a dozen years since I had last seen Sarah, who works for the U.S. Geological Survey. And it had been 30 years since I spent one fateful afternoon with her in a vacant lot behind the University of California, Riverside. We had met in an organic chemistry class. I was preparing for graduate school in botany and she was a graduate student in entomology. In contrast to Sarah, I was in the habit of avoiding most insects other than ladybugs, because I wasn't sure which ones to trust.

We planned a walk with my 1-year old and 3-year old. First Sarah found a click beetle which, to the delight of both my children, would flip itself over with a click, if placed on its back. We watched bees that weren't honey bees and no, they wouldn't sting us if we didn't bother them. We found a fuzzy, bright red velvet ant, which is a wingless wasp, and yes, it could sting us hard if we touch its fuzzy butt. We found a preying mantis. Yes, my 3-year old (who is now Linus' father) could let the mantis creep up his arm.

That did it. The next semester I took a class in field entomology and eventually wrote my dissertation on wasp pollinators of two native buckwheat species on Arrastre Flats high in Southern California's San Bernardino Mountains. There I met a bee that had not been previously described as a species. The only plant species it visited for pollen was a small native onion that grows only on the few similar sites (called "pavement plains") that exist only in that Southern California mountain range. Having spent three years on Arrastre Flats, its plain sometimes floats across my mind before I go to sleep, and I hope (is that a prayer?) all is well for its creatures and plants.

I know how those New Orleans residents felt who refused to be rescued without their pets. That's how I feel about all the world's plants and animals. I guess it's a matter of who you watch and who you think about.

As for Linus, I hope he soon gets to meet one of the descendants of my Green River preying mantis. I know just which tributary canyon to look in.



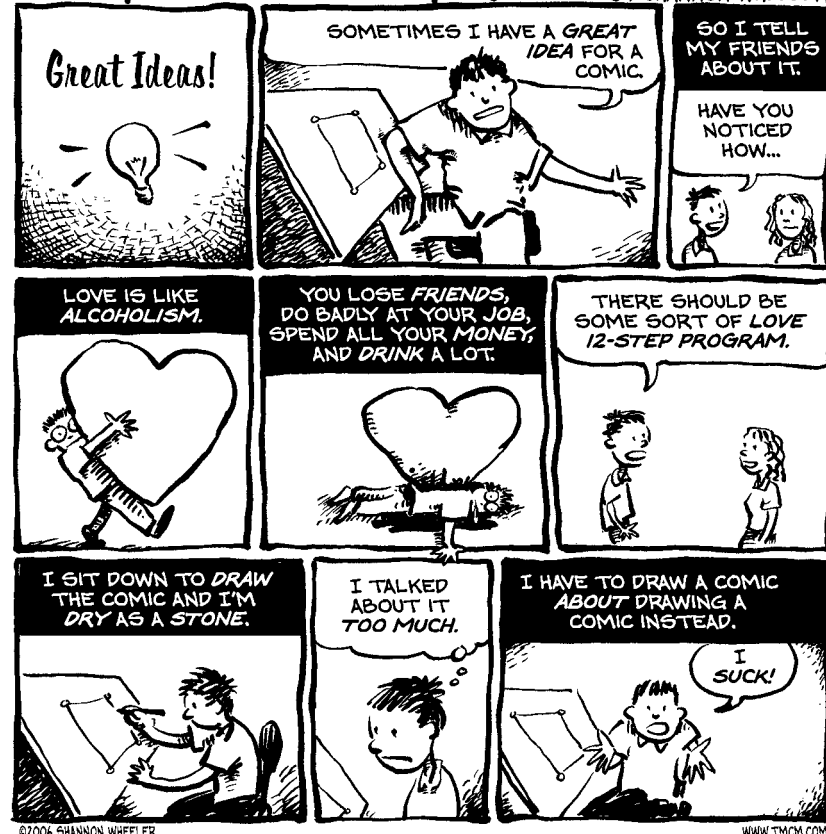
Baby Linus



Praying Mantis

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TOO MUCH COFFEE MAN BY SHANNON WHEELER



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

NEW YEAR WISHES

Happy New Year Eugene and thanks for all that you are! A special thanks to the extremely hard-working folks who grow our local organic foods, to those battling to save our remaining old-growth forests, to the wonderful folks running the non-profits that help those in need, to those creating a new paradigm with sustainable options for all of our futures, to local business owners who believe in and are investing in the community, to the local artists who show us new possibilities, and to all who speak up with passion as local issues arise.

I believe that what seems to make it so difficult to get anything done in Eugene is actually the same thing that makes Eugene so special in the first place: many, many caring people.

Already swirling thoughts and wishes for the new year and beyond:

- Continued revitalization and life in our downtown (people are what is needed downtown more than anything, together we can make it work).
- Eugene as a grand city for the arts and the outdoors with riverfront parks connecting with walking trails to downtown, a passenger train over the scenic coastal range, then biking up and down the coast, as well as tourists catching the train from Florence to our fair city.
- Lastly, I wish for more editorials with optimism, dreams of what is possible and fewer angry name-calling, judgmental letters.

"Nothing happens unless first a dream."

Tim Boyden
Eugene

WHY PLAY ALONG?

Joshua Welch's "Separation Anxiety" (12/29) struck a nerve with this pan-infidel. Supposedly, Lane County is the "most un-churched county in the most un-churched state in the union." While this may simply mean that fewer people here attend formal services, it nevertheless is hard to believe that the Eugene/Springfield area is somehow under-represented in terms of skeptics, when Wikipedia claims the nationwide ratio is about 1/7.

But you wouldn't know it according to the media, particularly around Dec. 25. Everywhere one turns, there's some story about "the miracle of Xmas", or, if one masochistically watches Fox News, "The War on Xmas." The *Springfield News* printed two pro-Xmas columns by Milt Cunningham, and a thunder-from-the-pulpit by Norm Fox, but my letter presenting a non-believer's point of view has yet to see the light (so to speak).

Nor are "progressives" blameless here; KOPT's Nancy Stapp spent weeks all but insisting that, even if the occasion doesn't fit into one's personal belief system, one (celebration) still can — indeed, almost *must* — be shoe-horned in somehow, whether it be via Hanukkah, Ramadan, Kwanzaa, or one of the Celtic-based New Age mythos. And if one doesn't care to play along? Why, then one is a "Scrooge."

Being a theist or an unbeliever has little to do with being an ethical, caring person. Indeed, I think physicist Stephen Weinberg put it best: "With or without religion, you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion."

Bill Smee
Springfield

WHY SECRECY

I guess that it is no surprise that for the last several days, right-wing talk show hosts such as Sean Hannity and Lars Larson have lauded George Bush for his recently exposed policy of spying on anyone, anytime, anywhere, devoid of congressional or judicial oversight. Many of their callers fall in lock step. One man stated "I ain't worried about the government listening to my calls 'cause I'm not doing anything wrong." This is followed by laughter and a quip by Larson about liberals holding hands with bin Laden. They might also get a good laugh studying the steady erosion of civil liberties in 1930s Germany.

It has been widely publicized that G.W. had access to the FISA court, a near rubber-stamp agency, which could issue surveillance warrants expeditiously, even retroactively.