

Rolling Reflections

A new awareness of urban infrastructure

After a long fall off of a big rock, I landed in a wheelchair for a couple of months with two broken feet. I can't use one foot to take the weight off the other, so instead of using crutches, I roll around these days.

The world we live in has never looked so different. I felt like I had to learn a new language because suddenly everyone in my town started speaking a new one. I began judging buildings not merely by the content inside their walls but by the nature of their access. Some of my favorite eateries and coffee shops in town no longer attract my attention because of insurmountable stairs or labyrinthine alternate entrances (ahem, you know who you are). A shop with merely a raised threshold will be enough to cause me to keep on rolling. I have never given so much consideration to civic infrastructure in my life.

The city sidewalks used to be a convenient way around town — without a bike, the logical choice for shorter excursions. But it came as news to me that sidewalks aren't exactly flat. So for me, that means one arm is relegated to doing all the work. Sidewalks presumably are engineered to drain the rains of November, but are menacing without a motor pushing your wheels. Admittedly, my \$20 Breezy from Goodwill does pull to the left a bit. But the undulating cement slabs are shifting ever so slowly, like continental plates on a metropolitan scale, being bulldozed meticulously by thickening tree roots or just constructed at an angle to shed the storm water. They have driven me to the streets.

The pavement meant for cars is ideal for my wheels as well. In fact, the very center of an avenue is the sweet spot, where my wheels span the spine that separates the lanes. This balance offers me equal locomotion from both arms — although with my ubiquitous headphones on I occasionally get startled by passing bikes and motorists. The quiet streets and bike routes are now my arteries through the city.

I've noticed people don't quite know how to behave around people with physical disabilities. While I appreciate it when someone holds a door as I try to "thread the needle" through the entry, I find myself bristling when a person rushes in to help me with easy tasks. Some interactions make me relieved I will walk again for social reasons, in addition to the physical ones. Like the teenage grocery clerk who refused to believe I didn't need his help filling my backpack, some people just don't trust that I'm pretty self-sufficient.

My friends are guilty of this over-zealous helping as well. At a party recently I was mixing myself an icy martini. As I maneuvered around the kitchen I held the attention of the room. Conversations ceased mid-sentence. One buddy admitted he just didn't know how to act around me and was fighting the urge to jump to my assistance at every opportunity.

This recent sympathy of friends and strangers hasn't been totally unwelcome, of course. During a First Friday ARTWalk not long ago, I was strolling (rolling) down Broadway with two friends on to the next installation. There was a small group ahead of us and from the other direction came an acquaintance of theirs at a full sprint. He lowered his shoulder into one of the guys in front of me in a drunken tackle. They both went stumbling across my foot rests and nearly tripped into the street. The tackler continued on his trajectory down the sidewalk, but the guy who received the hit was effusive with his apologies. "Sir, sir, I'm so sorry sir!" he apologized emphatically.

Meanwhile, my friend could not contain her amusement at this guy being so formal with me, shouting, "Sir! Ha! He's no sir!" If she had been drinking milk it would have sprayed out her nose and blanketed us all in a fine, white mist. Realizing his mistake (I'm 26 with a face that has never been mistaken for a sir before), he resumed his dramatic apology. "Dude, I'm so sorry, man!" He slapped me on the back, reached into his pocket and extended his closed fist. "Here you go man. Sorry about my buddy." As my friends recovered from the hilarity of the scene, I opened my palm to find a wadded up plastic baggie. Medical marijuana's legal in Oregon, right?

I believe there is an assumption that people in wheelchairs are helpless. But my experience has also led me to believe people in wheelchairs want and/or need different levels of assistance as they navigate the world. Disabilities reflect a large spectrum of ability and not everyone who is incapable of walking is just incapable. I always appreciate someone holding a door for me or moving a coffee shop table so I can get by. I wouldn't be able to travel by car without the tireless help of my girlfriend, folding and unfolding my chair at every stop.

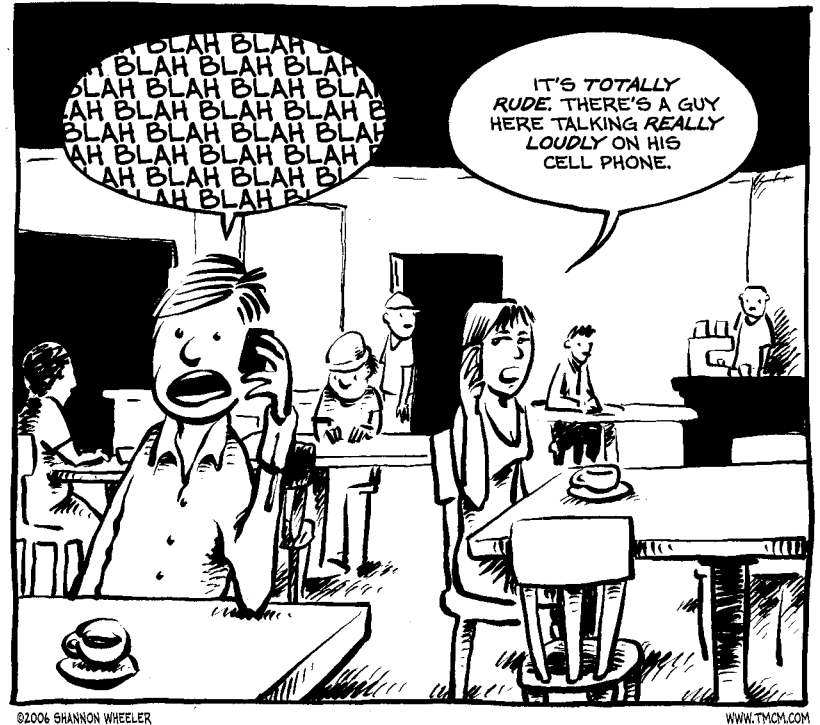
Yet the best moments of my day are often when I politely deny someone's assistance and they just offer me a smile. The further I move from the center of attention, the closer I move to my humanity. Empowering someone to help themselves can be the greatest help of all.



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How to Be Happy DOWN AT THE HYPOCRITE'S CAFE

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

DOING WHAT WE CAN

The end of a year is a time to reflect. This year has been full of change and information. The good news is people woke up to the Bush administration's devastating war on Iraq and showed it in the November elections. People are also waking up, thanks in great part to Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* documentary, about the very real and threatening climate change crisis.

My concern is not so much for humans but all the other species that have no say in this catastrophe that humans are causing. We have an obligation to do whatever we can to help slow and stop climate change.

The average citizen can cut his or her energy usage by 70 percent and not affect lifestyle. There are two meetings scheduled to discuss what we can do in Lane County, the "Lane County Energy Round Up" public forums. The first is Tuesday, Jan. 23 at Harris Hall on the UO campus. The second is Tuesday, Feb 27. On the local level, we can accomplish much. Let's help turn the tide in 2007 towards healing, love and unity. May ALL beings be free from suffering.

Pamela Driscoll
Eugene

A TRUE SERVICE

I want to thank Suzi Steffen for including our family in the article (12/21) on lesbian families and *The Register-Guard's* narrow-minded and discriminating policy in disallowing same-sex birth announcements. And I want to set the record "straight."

While we were one of the first lesbian families in the state of Oregon (Multnomah County, January, 1994) to accomplish a same-sex, second-parent adoption, we certainly know that we were not the first lesbians in Eugene to have a baby. We know several families who have children much older than our daughter born in 1992. These families, through their visibility as lesbians having children — then and now a

courageous act, even in Eugene — helped us know that having a baby was a positive, thrilling, joyous step toward familial fulfillment.

Because our announcement was printed in the *R-G*, it was so very heartwarming for me, having been born here, to hear from old acquaintances who wouldn't have received a personal birth announcement congratulating us on our new baby. Here's hoping the Bakers will realize, sooner than later, that this is a true community service.

Karm Hagedorn
Eugene

MORE DEADLY

So folks are anticipating the unfortunate arrival of the 3,000th U.S. death in Iraq. Excuse me while I abstain from the mourning, since I have bigger death tallies on my mind; many more people are killed by automobiles every four weeks (43,443 deaths and 2.7 million injuries in 2005).

At least the enlistees are aware that they'll be putting themselves in a dangerous position. I don't think you can say the same the next time you buckle your child into his seat in your car on the way to the store.

Jeffrey Stout
Eugene

MORE TREEHOUSES

The approach of 2007 has me reflecting a bit and thinking about wishes for myself and my community in the coming year.

I wish for more optimism and less pessimism, more hope and less fear, more love and less hate, more greenery and less concrete, more patience and less hurried anxiety, more peace and less war, more bicycles and fewer cars, more passion and less apathy, more laughs and fewer frowns, more joy and less worry, more handwritten letters and fewer emails, more understanding and less judging, more listening and less talking, more clean air and less pollution. I don't wish for much, eh? Ha ha!