

Crossing the Lines

The need for real conversations

I believe the single most moving, admirable behavior of humans is when they converse across lines: ethnic, religious, socioeconomic, political, racial, age, cultural or species.

Barbara McClintock won a Nobel Prize in 1983 for her scientific research on so-called "jumping genes," mobile sequences of DNA within the genetic material of a cell. She discovered this process in the 1940s and early 1950s. It helped explain how genes can turn off or on the expression of some physical characteristics in a living being. Other scientists finally understood her work in the 1960s and 1970s as they studied genetic regulation and genetic change. McClintock spent her adult life with corn, and a fellow scientist remarked that McClintock was able to see things happening within corn genes that others had not yet seen because she empathized with corn. She conversed with corn, listening by observing and talking by testing hypotheses. A biography of McClintock is titled *A Feeling for the Organism*.



I remember a remarkable, quiet conversation in 1980 with a soldier who was on lunch break during military training in the San Bernardino Mountains of Southern California. I was doing my botany doctoral research there among buckwheat flowers and their pollinators. He wandered over to where I was tracking wasps and attending to plants that were variously covered with thin cloth cages or open to insect visits. He asked about everything I did. Because I needed to have the various species of wasps identified for my dissertation, I had a killing jar and he watched as I placed two wasps in it.

"I notice you didn't watch the wasps as they were dying," he said. I hadn't noticed. "You're right," I admitted. "I don't like to see what I'm doing."

Then I ventured the reciprocity. "I guess that's how military people can bomb villages from the air, yes? They don't have to see what they're doing."

A silence. "I think you're right," he said. He stayed on until he needed to return to his squad.

"Well," he said, "I thought I was just going for a walk during lunch. I didn't know I was going to learn so much about life."

Me neither.

The Latin origin of the word "conversation" is "com" (with) + "vertare" (turn about) = "turn about with." This carries the essence of conversation: its two-way nature; its reciprocity; its equality among those engaged in conversation; the changes that can happen.

Perhaps the polar opposite of conversation is subjugation. The Latin origin of the word comes from "sub" (under) + "jugum" (yoke) = "to bring under a yoke."

War is not a conversation. Neither is imprisonment without rights. Authoritarian parenting. Extinction of species. Political control through economic wealth. Toxic emissions. Unequal treatment of gay people. Heating of everyone's climate. Overpopulation of Earth by humans. Abusive words.

In each of these cases, the exchanges are not equal or reciprocal. One side is doing the "talking"; the effect is to place the other under a yoke. It's never good.

We've had a long non-conversation in Eugene regarding the West Eugene Parkway. And then some people on opposite sides of the parkway issue began conversing. They listened and considered what each other was saying. Then there were some more conversations. About west Eugene transportation. Transportation needs of commercial industries. Transportation options for Veneta. Wetlands. Fears. How to get past fears.

Our community is now inching toward a formal, sustained conversation (a "collaborative process") about solutions for transportation and environment in west Eugene. Where everyone who cares about the outcome (including butterflies) is well represented. Where everyone present will be encouraged to talk and everyone else is expected to listen. Where everyone tries to offer solutions all the others can accept and everyone is expected to consider ideas they hadn't previously considered.

Those who engage in conversations are the hope of the world. The Ron Chases who converse with ex-cons and the Sister Prejeans who converse with murderers. Teachers who converse well with eighth-graders. The Kevin Wheelers who converse with boreal toads in muddy mountain ponds. The Kitty Piercys who try to converse with everyone in their community. The Al Gores who converse with the atmosphere. The journalists who converse with the despised; the discarded; the innovators; ones who know what isn't being told.

We need conversations across lines because we never know as much as we thought we did. Such conversations tend to foment understanding. At a remarkable rate, they replace fear with affection and impasses with solutions. They are born out of courage.

Mary O'Brien of Eugene has worked as a public interest scientist since 1981. She can be reached at mob@efn.org

ings! Of course, it's happening everywhere in the media. We just thought "What's Happening" in the *Weekly* was different, that's all!

Janelle Kinsky
Eugene

IRONY OF IRONIES!

I love it! Cuba, our nemesis, the so-called "godless, communist enemy of the U.S." is now where the Bush administration can carry out its unconstitutional policies at Guantanamo prison. Since Cuba has sovereignty over the base, U.S. laws do not apply there. Too ironic!

The country, whose leader the U.S. has been trying to assassinate for almost 50 years and whose government the U.S. has been trying to overthrow, turns out to be Bush's best friend in providing a haven for his illegal maneuverings.

He and his conservative Cuban Americans ought to write Castro a letter of apology and thanks.

Lucia McKelvey
Eugene

OUR DEAD CENTER

Why do we live in a city without a living center after all these years? We are potentially such a bike and pedestrian friendly city, but we've already seen the Woolworth pit — it was muraled two, three years ago — and the Sears lake was drained last year. Where do we want to bike or walk to? This city contains a vibrant activist community. City offices overlook this mess. Wouldn't it be nice if we could get it together?

Michael Roberts
Eugene

RIDING HIGH

On Thursday of last week I stopped at my favorite bread store, Great Harvest, in a small shopping center on Willamette. I pulled into a parking space in front of the store. There were four or five spaces available. I bought a loaf of bread, and when I left the store, I noticed a woman getting out of an expensive, large SUV parked right next to me. I thought that was typical of SUV owners. Because they ride up high, their view is not obstructed. It's not that they are inconsiderate, but they would be if they were aware of what they are doing. But they don't even realize that they are making it difficult for someone in a small car to back out if they park alongside of them. I can see parking next to someone but not when there are several spaces to choose from.

They don't realize what they are doing because they are so wrapped up in their materialistic life they give no thought to others.

Tony Gregory
Eugene

RABID RANTING

The people who are so incensed about the content of "Savage Love" are missing the point.

It is not meant to shock or harm anyone, especially not children, as seems to be one of the loudest and most ridiculous accusations. "Savage Love" is a forum in which people can seek straightforward, non-judgmental advice on topics that they may not even be able to bring up anywhere else.

If the people who are so outraged actually took the time to READ the entire column(s), they might see that Mr. Savage is consistently encouraging people to respect and protect themselves and their partners when it comes to sex — whatever kind of sex they choose to have.

Please keep "Savage Love" in the *Weekly*. Don't bow down to the rabid ranting of people who obviously read it only to get themselves worked up into a self-righteous fervor. Those will be the people you will never be able to please anyway.

Sabella Dziabczenko
Eugene

TEETH TIME

This has gone way too far. Two incredible musicians killed in a fatal accident because a drunk driver managed to get on the freeway in the wrong direction!

According to the Oregon State Police, there have been 87 such happenings in the last few years!

How about simply installing "Tiger Teeth," those one-way metal tire spikes, on every single exit ramp on I-5? That would stop anybody trying to get on the freeway in the wrong direction from doing it by instantly giving them flat tires.

Sure, it will cost some money. But it beats having innocent people killed by somebody getting on the freeway in the wrong direction!

Ken Silverman
Eugene

THE DREADED HILLARY

Without a doubt the Republican party is now on the ropes. Perhaps two years from now it won't exist. Not since Watergate has this country felt so broken, fragmented and confused. Only one person can save the Republicans — Hillary Clinton. Indeed, Hillary, the one the Republicans love to hate. Combating the dreaded Hillary, they will come back in droves, raise piles of money, bury their considerable hatchets and pull their broken party off the ash heap. Hillary, and only Hillary, can save them! She alone has this much power — this gift! Hillary Clinton is indeed the Republican *bête noire*!

Joe Mogus
Philomath

WHO YOU GONNA BLAME?

EDITORIAL Editor Ted Taylor
 News Editor Alan Pittman
 Arts & Music Editor Molly Templeton
 Performing & Visual Arts/Copy Editor Suzi Steffen
 Calendar Editor Chuck Adams
 Contributing Editor Anita Johnson
 Contributing Writers Jason Blair, Martha Calhoun, Brett Campbell, Rachael Carnes, Michael Cockram, David Constantin, John Dooley, Rachel Foster, James Johnston, Sarah Mazze, Sharleen Nelson, Mary O'Brien, Aaron Ragan-Forre, Vanessa Salvia, Steven Sawada, Sally Shelkoff, Lance Sparks, Adrienne van der Valk
 Interns Amanda Burhop, Nicole Fancher

ART DEPARTMENT
 Art Director/Production Manager Kevin Dougherty
 Graphic Artist/Webmaster James Bateman
 Graphic Artists Todd Cooper, Barbara Cooper
 Contributing Photographers Kurt Jensen, Paul Neevel

ADVERTISING
 National Sales Manager Mark Frisbee
 Display Marketing Consultant Jennifer Donohue, Nate Krusi, Rob Weiss
 Advertising Traffic Coordinator Drew Harrison
 Classified Manager Jennifer Donohue
 Classified Marketing Consultant Janus Breznsy, Aspen Rosen

BUSINESS Director of Sales and Marketing Bill Shreve
 Circulation Manager Danica Stiles
 Controller Paula Hoemann
 Distributors Bob Becker, Matt Bryson, Margaret Garrison, Tobin Herrera, Susan and David Lawson, Tim Risch, Quick Draw, Pedalers Express
 Printing Signature Graphics

HOW TO REACH US BY E-MAIL:
 (letters): editor@eugeneweekly.com
 (advertising): ads@eugeneweekly.com
 (classifieds): classifieds@eugeneweekly.com
 (personals): personals@eugeneweekly.com
 (calendar): cal@eugeneweekly.com
 (music/clubs/special shows): music@eugeneweekly.com
 (art/openings/galleries): visualarts@eugeneweekly.com
 (performance/theater): performance@eugeneweekly.com
 (literary arts/readings): books@eugeneweekly.com
 (movies/film screenings): movies@eugeneweekly.com
 (circulation): distribution@eugeneweekly.com

Eugene Weekly • 1251 Lincoln Street • Eugene, OR 97401 • 541.484.0519 • fax 541-484-4044