

Not Dying Alone

Homeless but not friendless in south Eugene

"I've got some bad news." I waited an interminable moment for my wife Jamie's next words. "Walt died." My heart sank. He wasn't a family member or close friend. In fact, Walter Reid was a homeless fellow who often slept in front of Black Sun Books, right next to Allann Bros. Coffee in South Eugene. I'd gotten to know him when I stopped by a few times a week for coffee before I took my two dogs for their morning walk.



Walt was a stooped 6' with shaggy brown hair and a beard, and his eyes peered out from underneath a weathered ball cap. His smile was genuine, and the spirit of it wasn't diminished by the patchwork of missing teeth. He had a bike packed with a diverse assortment of items, a beat-up old sleeping bag and always, by his side, his dog, Osa. Osa was some sort of a mutt, solid and wide, with black matted fur. Like her companion, she had a gentle demeanor. Nonetheless, if you knew dogs, you knew that messing with Walt meant messing with Osa, and that you'd better bring your lunch if you chose that route.

I enjoyed my conversations with Walt. Occasionally I'd offer to buy him a cup of coffee. Sometimes he'd accept, always gratefully. Other times he'd foretell his imminent demise when he'd smile and say, "I'm having a beer instead." Then he'd tip the can to the morning sun that was barely creeping over the horizon. He became a familiar face in my South Eugene routine.

Jamie marveled at the shrine that someone had set up outside Black Sun Books, at the spot where Walt and Osa used to sleep on the cold cement. Incense wafted around photos of them, creating a church-like atmosphere. There was a book for people to write their final goodbyes in. In another city, Walt might have been just another nameless statistic, another burden not to deal with anymore. Not here. His book was full of farewells. A funeral announcement completed the memorial.

At the last minute, I decided to pay my respects. As I made my way south to Goshen in the gray rain, I imagined a sparsely attended, brief goodbye to someone, who for whatever reasons, hadn't made the grade in society. A scruffy looking biker-type met me outside with a warm smile when I arrived. Familiar faces from the streets and alleyways of south Eugene gathered in small groups.

Weaving my way inside, I saw the bookstore owner who had allowed Walt to sleep at his store's doorstep for many months. There was the owner of the local bike shop, who had given Walt the bicycle that meant so much to a man with so little. There was a teacher on his way to his granddaughter's ballet performance who stopped to pay his respects and a solemn faced barista from Allann Bros. The owner and one of the managers of Sundance Natural Foods arrived with arms full of boxes of fresh produce, chips, salsa and dips. The crowd was diverse, and the modest house was packed as people overflowed into the turbulent weather outside. There were flowers from the local florist and a large box of dog food, supplements and toys for Osa from the Amazon Park Veterinary Clinic, located just around the corner from Walt and Osa's "home." In a gesture of benevolent compassion, they offered veterinary services to the ailing Osa for the remainder of her life. Before Walt let go for good, his last wish was that Osa be cared for. That wish was granted by his teary-eyed former wife and her husband.

What had driven Walt to homelessness and eventual liver failure at the age of 52? The puzzle of the demise of this one time vibrant "10 cord a day" wood-chopper fell together in pieces: the break-up with his wife and the mother of his two daughters, the tragic automobile accident which claimed his new love and her children, whom he also grew to love, a longing for space and room to breathe, alcoholism and who knows of the other demons that he may have fought.

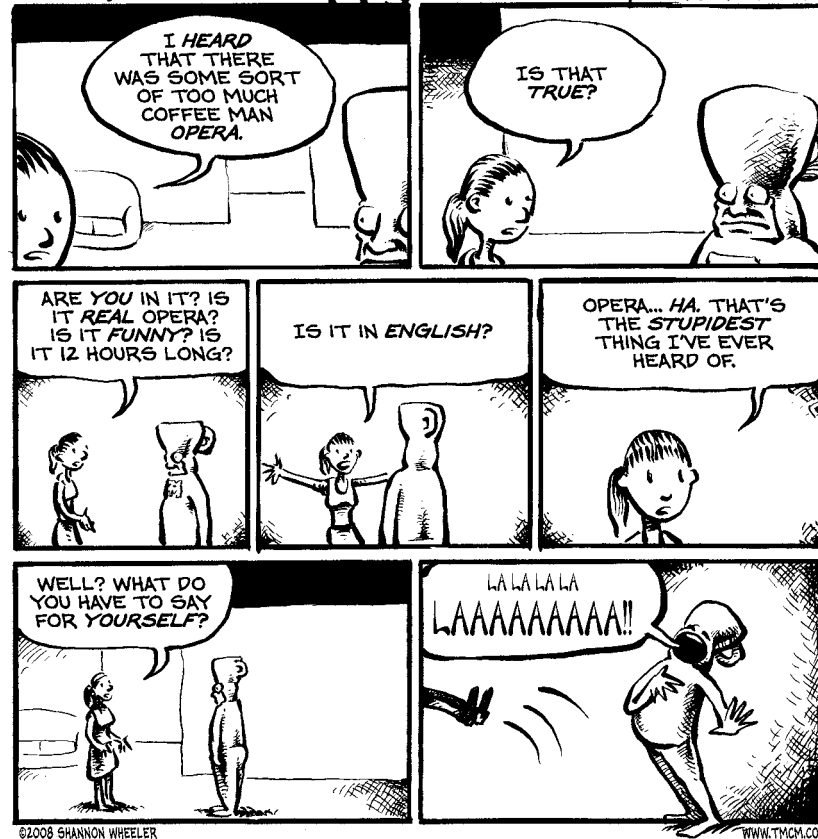
Many a captain of industry, celebrity or politician may have drawn a larger number of "mourners" to his or her service, but every single one of us who spilled out of the house, onto the porch and into the driveway really and truly cared for this fallen man.

It was dry when I left for my car. The rain started to fall as I pulled out into the street. A drop or two came from my own eyes. It was bittersweet. I reflected on the passing of a gentle man and an unfulfilled life. Yet, a part of me could not restrain the feeling of pride I had for this community that I had chosen to raise my family in. A community where people from all walks of life stopped what they were doing, and gathered together to celebrate the life of a good man, regardless of his "status." Period.

May you rest in peace Walt, and know that your time on this earth touched others.

How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



REAL CHOICES

In support of David Richards' "Cover the Others" letter (3/20), why do we get so concerned about the candidates for the next president when quite a few of us recognize that our election and "democracy" systems are what need changing?

Among the corruptions are the two-party system, campaign financing, Electoral College, voting computers with proprietary software and no paper trails, lack of an IRV or other ranked voting system, media corruption and last but not least, the unjustly rich always being able to buy unjust political power to help them continue adding to their wealth. If we had financial reform to where one's wealth is reasonably proportional to social contributions, at least campaign financing wouldn't be such a problem.

Here's an idea. Let's vote first for a few people who can ask, on national public media, pertinent questions of all candidates for public office and expect answers. Grand speeches are OK, but then candidates choose what to talk about.

Until we get such reforms, I see it as more important to let the parties know what kind of candidates and systems I'd like to see rather than my small attempt to choose the best of mediocre candidates. Unless someone else mentions this major issue of election reform, I expect to be writing in Kucinich for Dem and Nader in November. No, it's not a vote for the other side, because my next choice might be to not bother voting.

Dan Robinson
Eugene

COZY RELATIONSHIP

EW (News Briefs, 3/13) quoted Jim Torrey as follows: "We don't have to get any more money. We need a marriage of business and government in order to pay the bills."

In 1942, President Roosevelt defined fascism in this way: "The first truth is that the liberty of a democracy is not safe if

the people tolerate the growth of private power to a point where it becomes stronger than their democratic state itself. That, in its essence, is fascism — ownership of government by an individual, by a group, or by any other controlling private power."

So exactly what kind of cozy relationship did Torrey have in mind? Given his prior record, it's apparent that if he is re-elected as mayor, locally we will see more corporate welfare and more benefits for the already wealthy class.

Meanwhile, the rest of us can count on being screwed.

Steve Miller
Eugene

SENSE OF FUTILITY

Yesterday (3/16), I attended the rally and march against the war in Eugene. The hundreds of people who were there held signs and sang chants that I am familiar with from other marches I've attended against the Iraq War (and other Bush/Cheney actions/policies) in other cities over the past few years.

What became very clear to me during this last one was a sense of futility, a sense that our protest was having no effect, the occupations will go on, we will not get our rights back, no clean energy revolution, etc. Most seemed focused on Obama/Clinton as the solution, but why are we going to let the next seven months go by with zero accountability?

Why is it OK to allow thousands more civilians and soldiers to die in a war based on lies? What is it that allows the Bush administration to get away with treason, mass murder and war crimes?

The answer is very simple, and yet I've seen over and over otherwise intelligent people suddenly become disabled in their ability to think critically and with common sense when it comes to this answer: The official story on 9/11. That ridiculous and proven to be false story is their "get out of jail free card," it is their eternal "justification"