

Living Artfully

The meaning of the Oregon Country Fair

In 1969 the Oregon Country Fair began, its website says, as a benefit for an *alternative* school. *Alternative* art, performance, education, land use and philanthropy characterizes OCF's history. OCF is about nourishing the spirit, living artfully and transforming culture in "magical," joyous and healthy ways. Its purpose is to entertain, foster craftsmanship, serve healthy food and share information.



But when one looks at the cultural circumstances of its birth and growth, OCF not only shares information, it generates meaning. As we need sex, human beings need meaning. We are suspended in webs of meaning we ourselves have spun over millennia – whether drawn from humanity's ancient rivers of religious and philosophical tradition or from the small-scale or *alternative* streams of consciousness of, say, Native Americans or the modern romanticism of Whitman, Ginsberg, Kerouac, Kesey and Dylan. No one person or party is the answer to the perennial question of life's meaning, though some would relieve you of all responsibility to think for yourself.

Sometimes chaos threatens – as it did during the '60s and on 9/11 – to break in on our world. Such shocks compel us to break through the limits of the meanings we take for granted and shift the accent of reality to *alternatives*.

The birth of OCF did not happen in a vacuum. It occurred in the context of a fundamental questioning of the legitimacy of the established order – a politically and morally charged cultural earthquake of social change echoing aftershocks still today.

Centering on the civil rights and anti-Vietnam war movements, the nation's moral fabric unraveled in the 1960s.

Activists and writers such as Martin Luther King Jr., Michael Harrington, Betty Friedan and Rachel Carson articulated and demanded new ethical standards about how people of color, the poor, women and the environment are treated – challenging their fellow Americans to at least live up to the moral purposes our government claims to represent.

The erosion of the legitimacy of major American institutions – business, government, education, religion, family – set in, particularly among '60s youth, the generation that gave birth to OCF.

OCF is a response to this crisis of meaning marked not only by the profound hypocrisy and injustice black people, other people of color, the poor and women have long suffered in American society, but also by a flat, utilitarian society.

In a heavily utilitarian society, OCF's "intention" to transform culture in "magical" ways makes a lot of sense.

In other words, OCF is part of an effort – that includes the hip, psychedelic and radical political wings of '60s youth – to re-enchant and transform American society toward something more in line with the revolutionary spirit of the founders, Lincoln's vision of a united nation that is not half-slave and half-free, FDR's social liberalism, Kennedy's idealism and King's dream.

The '60s shocked America's national psychology and shifted the accent of reality to an *alternative* – but no less American – part of what historian Richard Hofstadter called the American political tradition. OCF shocks us in this way annually.

Yet the last 40 years have been a near-continuous reaction against progressive change. We now have a neo-conservative establishment – which transformed the U.S. into a brutal imperial republic abroad and a soft despotism of the wealthy at home – the polar opposite of what the '60s, OCF and the American political tradition mean at their best.

But OCF holds up an *alternative* model of reality representing hope, not naïve optimism. We take for granted the world of everyday life. We accept it as natural and associate a pragmatic attitude with it. The natural attitude of our routine, rational, work-a-day consciousness is based, however, on a suspension of doubt that things might be other than they appear – a doubt rooted in OCF's origin in *alternative* education.

It is a doubt Bob Dylan's 1965 "Ballad of a Thin Man" expresses well: *You've been with the professors / And they've all liked your looks / You've been through all of / F. Scott Fitzgerald's books / You're very well read / It's well known / Because something is happening here / But you don't know what it is / Do you, Mister Jones?*

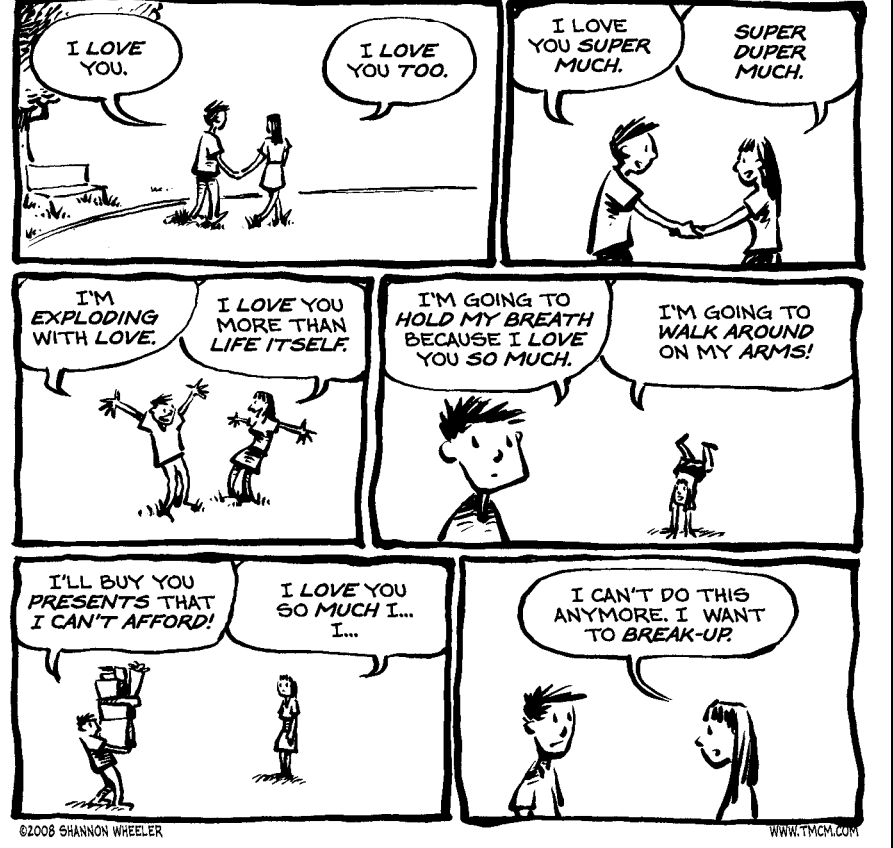
OCF claims no monopoly on the (moral) meanings of life. But it quenches our hunger for meaning as it continues to generate rich webs of *alternative* meanings feeding our heads and souls as well as stomachs.

Thirty-nine years since OCF's birth, many citizen groups throughout American society continue to work for a different kind of society – an *alternative* kind of world. In many ways OCF remains a handbook for such groups.

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How to Be Happy

by Shannon Wheeler



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

FILLING THE PIT

Downtown is literally the pits, but it doesn't have to be.

On July 14 the City Council will be considering, and possibly choosing, one of several development projects for the pit across the street from the Eugene Public Library. Do we *need* more buildings downtown? Do we *need* one right next to the library? Have you noticed we already *have* a lot of buildings downtown? Buildings that already provide us with numerous vacant storefronts that no one wants to rent? Yet the city proposes yet another building project, giving downtown developers yet another tax break while only giving us, the people, just another building.

What we need in the pit is not a building, but a people's park! Did anyone suggest this to the city? Well, of course. Did the city pay attention to this suggestion? Well, of course not!

A park next to the library would give library patrons a place to sit and read their books. Kind of obvious, eh? It would also provide a place for seniors at nearby Olive Plaza to spend time just sitting in the sun. It would even provide a place for all those kids who now have nowhere to go but the sidewalk by the library or the LTD bus station.

Would there be any "problems" if we had a park there? Oh, gosh, yes. We might even need to have, brace yourself for a startling and shocking concept, a police officer stationed at the park to maintain order. There's already a police substation at 11th and Olive, so at least it would be a short commute.

Nothing that the city does downtown will be without problems. Should anyone doubt that, they have forgotten that "downtown mall" project that drove so many folks out of business. Or that "Whole Foods" project. Or (insert your favorite here).

The two previous pit proposals adopted by the city plummeted right into, you guessed it, the pit. We must stop the City Councilors before they *plan* again! Putting

a park next to the library makes good sense, which is all the more reason we have to worry that the city won't do it. Downtown Eugene doesn't have to be the pits, but it will be if we let this chance to put a people's park in place pass by!

Randy Stenersen
Eugene

ADS NOT PROGRESSIVE

I can't believe that I'm the only one who noticed something wholly incongruous about your special "State of Suds" advertising insert for the June 26th issue of the *Weekly*. Presumably dedicated to promoting and celebrating uniquely Oregon beers (microbrews, by implication), the two most prominent ads promote non-micro, non-Oregon brews: a full back page advertisement for Beck's and another full page ad right inside the front cover for Rolling Rock. I should cease to be surprised at anything *EW's* advertising department produces. For an alternatively positioned publication, many of your ads and some of your features often strike me as a conflict of progressive/regressive interests. This time, it's just wryly amusing. The *Weekly* ads for American Apparel and so-called escort services and your cheesy, edgy penchant for the salacious are something else. Oh yes, and in the same supplement, you didn't pass on a chance to sell a third full page advertisement for American Spirit (a cigarette is still a cigarette, however "natural" you spin it). It's not progressive; it's simply a shame.

Jennifer Rowan
Eugene

JUST DON'T DO IT

I'd like to know why Zachary Vishanoff, whose letters to the editor frequently grace these pages, feels the need to plaster the windows of campus-area *Eugene Weekly* newspaper boxes with his "Class War, Just Do It" flyers. While I am sure we could debate whether this message is either clever