

# Crossing Chasms

A challenge for every nation and town

Last Friday I was sitting at the kitchen table of a friend. I was recalling an interview I had read in one of Studs Terkel's books decades ago. Maybe it was in *Hard Times*, in which people recalled their experiences of the Great Depression. Maybe it was in *Working*, in which people reflected on their feelings about the work they do.



Regardless, the interview I was recounting to my friend was with a man who had been a local Ku Klux Klan leader and an electrician (or was he a plumber?) in a small southern town. The town was losing its youth because of economic stagnation. The City Council (or maybe it was the mayor) appointed this man and a local black social justice activist to co-chair a committee that would look at economic options for the town.

Neither one could turn the offer down because if he or she did so, the other one would unduly shape the economic vision. But working with the enemy isn't easy, and one day the activist walked into the electrician's office, announcing she couldn't continue. Too many of her friends were on her case because he was a Klan leader. The Klan leader admitted that he, too, was on the verge of quitting, for the opposite reason. At that point, they both realized that these divisions were themselves the enemy, and they decided to stick together.

At the end of the interview, the man tells Terkel that the night Martin Luther King Jr. was shot, he organized a Klan celebration in town. Now, he told Studs, he gets tears in his eyes when he hears a recording of King's "I Have a Dream" speech. He states that his current union responsibility is helping African-American electricians navigate their way into the union.

That interview is a touchstone of my life, because it seems to represent the surest bridge across virtually any of the social chasms that currently divide Americans or, indeed, nations: Namely, solve problems together.

And do we have chasms. Sarah Palin tells her "base" that Obama "is not a man who sees America as you see America and as I see America." Samuel Wurzelbacher (aka Joe the Plumber) believes that "[Obama's] ideology is completely different than what democracy stands for." Twenty-three percent of Texans are convinced Obama is a Muslim. Where does this nonsense come from?

In his 2007 book, *Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America's Class War*, Joe Bageant writes of his own working class, gun-toting, theocracy-leaning, economically screwed-over, health care-underserved, information-limited, Republican-fodder, white community in Winchester, Va. It sounds like a community in which Palin, Wurzelbacher and 23 percent of Texans could have grown up.

But Bageant describes how ignorance is two-way, with urban liberals woefully uninformed about the history, economic struggles, lack of access to education, corporate manipulations and social pressures that lead to Palin politicians, Wurzelbacher workers and deer hunting with Jesus.

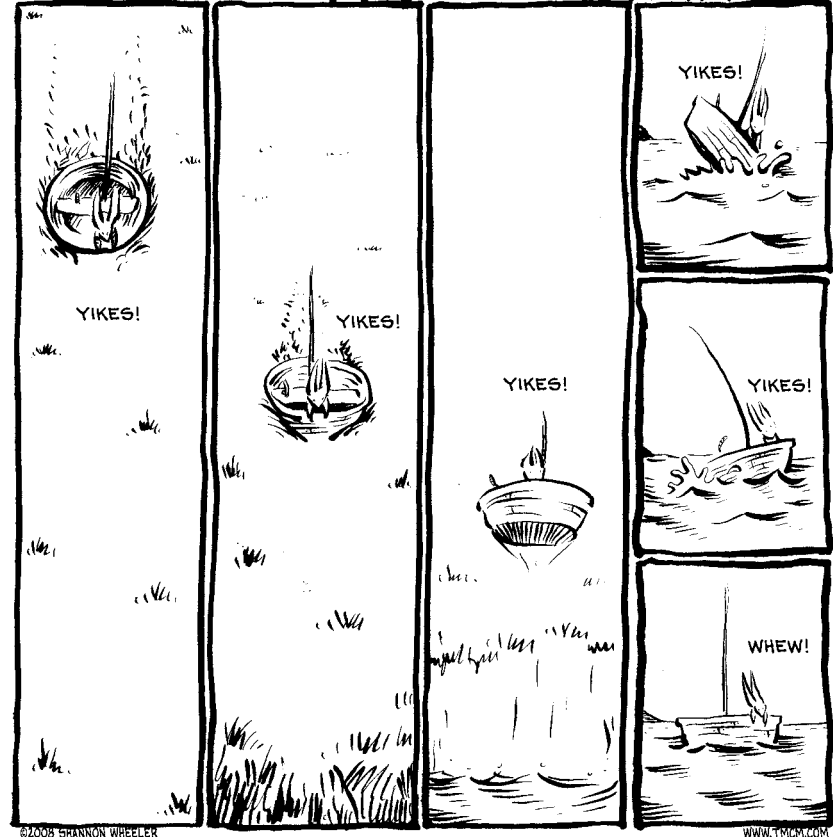
Of course, the chasms exist within each of our towns, within each of our neighborhoods. I remember leaning on Eugene's street children to help me and my husband locate the 13-year-old sister of a 15-year-old for whom we were establishing legal guardianship. Our community of street children is large, poor, abused and mostly hidden.

My hope for an Obama administration is that our nation will take significant steps to face and reduce some of the social divisions and ignorance which the Bush administrations have both fanned and depended upon for getting elected, waging wars, filling armies, accepting loss of job benefits and decreased wages, increasing corporate profits and redistributing wealth to the wealthy.

A few hours after I was telling my friend about Studs Terkel's memorable conversation with the Klan leader, Terkel died at age 96. By his bedside was a copy of his new book, *P.S. Final Thoughts from a Lifetime of Listening*. By all accounts, Obama is another skilled listener. I'll bet Terkel would have loved to watch his fellow Chicagoan get the chance to try to bridge some of the chasms to which Terkel faithfully bore witness and which don't have to plague our nation.

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## How to Be Happy (CUTIE ISLAND 10 OF 8) by Shannon Wheeler



## LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

### DIARRHEA OR CONSTIPATION?

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, the "experts" were quick to proclaim that communism was dead. We may now be approaching the time to proclaim that capitalism is on the way out too. While communism demonstrated that government shouldn't run business, the recent economic collapse is demonstrating that business shouldn't run government.

Let us remember, though, that we have more choices than those two extreme ends of the spectrum listed above. Comparing U.S.-style capitalism with Soviet-style communism is like comparing diarrhea with constipation. Under one condition, growth and consumer excess come spewing out in a torrent while in the other condition, little or nothing comes out. Most of us don't care to suffer from either of those two opposite conditions. We'd like something in the middle.

Let us emerge from our current economic crisis intent on establishing a new economic model with the inherent efficiencies of a market driven system but with various other characteristics largely unheard of in the now-collapsing economic model: We must have full cost accounting to factor in environmental and social costs. We must develop a steady state economic model no longer dependent on growth. There must be a societal mandate that basic human needs shall be met on a global level. Obscene wealth must be discouraged. Greed and corruption must not be rewarded. And last but not least, genuine, meaningful sustainability must be sought.

Robert Bolman  
Eugene

arts, needs the community's help as well. In addition to buying paintings, sculptures and the like from our local artists, I urge you to consider the amazing range of Eugene and Lane County's live theater, music, comedians, dancers and other performing artists. There's a lot more to be found in town than the latest touring company of (insert name of classic musical here) or a concert by (insert name of middle-of-the-road musician here). Why not treat yourself to (insert name of low-cost, locally grown entertainment here) for a change?

Russell Dyball  
PotPie Theater

### R-G FLIP-FLOP

So, *The Register-Guard* got all huffy because Mayor Piercy thought the about-face the paper conducted in choosing her for mayor and then ("we changed our mind") flip-flopping and choosing Torrey instead was kind of weird. So offended were the old *Guard* that they decided to deliver a double whammy editorial opinion to grind in their point, right before elections.

Well face it, what could have happened to make them flip-flop like that? I think it is very weird, and so do a lot of people.

The *R-G* confounds us even further with the hilarious assertion that there are no big business interests in little Eugene. Who are they kidding? That is just as funny as Torrey pretending he's not a Republican at heart. We have concrete capitalists, garbage kings, communication queens and billboard magnates, just to name a few. Isn't the *Register-Guard*, monopoly that it is, a big business interest? I think so.

Janice Sunseri  
Eugene

### SUPPORT LOCAL ARTS

The item in *Slant* (10/30) regarding the unfortunate closing of Zenon Café makes an excellent point in that we, as members of our community, need to buy local whenever we can. An element of that which was neglected in the item, our local performing

### BUSH'S SUCCESS

What's with all this talk about how incompetent George W. Bush has been? I truly don't understand how so many consider his presidency a failure. As a matter of fact, his administration may