

Wild Relatives

Botanists are driven by curiosity

Summer conspires with our vacations to reconnect us with Earth's life. Her long days, warm weather, active animal life, and rapid plant life cycles make this season the easiest time to visit any number of our relatives, both those genetically close and those farther away.



During the past month, two remarkable people have reminded me how such visits can morph into lifetime affections.

I had last seen Oscar Clarke and Marsia, his artist wife, on the August 1981 day when I moved from southern California to Eugene. That morning I loaded my family's gear from Oscar's barn into a U-Haul and headed north on I-5. I had met the gregarious, self-taught botanist in 1975 when he was curator (manager) of the herbarium at University of California Riverside, and I was mounting pressed plants for a botany class. Later I, my husband, and two small boys would join him on too few of his notorious, shoestring field trips in his VW bus. They were crazy-quilt adventures at which every plant, pollinator, snake, grub, or bird that crossed our vision or soundscape became a wonder and had a story.

Two weeks ago, 400 people like me celebrated Oscar's 90th birthday outdoors, telling stories differing only in the details of how Oscar had changed our lives with his knowledge of and enthusiasm for every wild being. Oscar listened to each story, interrupting only to correct this or that technical detail. This birthday party followed by two years a party upon the publication of his remarkable guide to every plant species inhabiting his huge, largely-urbanized Santa Ana River watershed in southern California. Each of his three coauthors were perhaps half his 88 years and thrilled to have worked with him.

On the other hand, I met Dennis Bramble for only the first time last month. In 1992, while a biology professor at University of Utah, Dennis bought an old homestead of 160 acres near Escalante, Utah. The land, adjacent to Dixie National Forest, had been heavily grazed by cattle for more than a century.

Throughout the past 17 years, Dennis has documented changes since he began grazing the property with far fewer cows, only in the fall, and not at all during drought years. Via repeat photos at 25 points, electronic data from two weather stations, and countless hours walking the land noting which animal and plant species are decreasing and which increasing, he is compiling a rare and immensely useful story of recovery on depleted land. For instance, 12 species of grass were present when Dennis bought the property. More than 50 now grow there, all arriving naturally. Porcupines disappeared at some time since the 1950s from his watershed. Dennis will find out when they were last active on the land by aging the scars on tree limbs where bark was stripped by this once-common species that is now disappearing throughout the West.

We tend to label as "childlike" the boundless delight and curiosity emanating from people like Oscar and Dennis. However, the decision to notice, wonder about, and care for all beings partakes far more of an adult character than is evinced by our species as a whole.

It's summer, and a lot of your relatives await your visit.

Mary O'Brien has worked as a public interest scientist since 1981. She is currently dividing her time between Eugene and Castle Valley, Utah.

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW



LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

THE TRUE TILLER

Too few Oregonians had the privilege of meeting Dr. George Tiller, recently murdered in Kansas. Those of us who were lucky enough to have heard him speak about his work knew we were in the presence of a man of great compassion and sensitivity.

Only a person totally dedicated to expanding women's choices and improving their lives could continue the work he did, year after year, in the face of the intimidation and harassment he routinely faced. The astounding costs of the legal battles he had to continually fight should dispel any notion that he was in it for the money.

It is indeed a tragedy that his voice has been silenced. For those of us who knew him, the memory of his profound empathy and commitment will continue to inspire.

*Gerald Morsello
Eugene*

EXTEND THE OLIVE BRANCH

With President Obama's strong stand against West Bank settlement expansion, his speech in Cairo advancing the need for a state of Palestine living in peace alongside the state of Israel and his recent visit to the Buchenwald concentration camp, he has underscored his commitment to survival, security and dignity for both peoples.

Islamist rejectionists of Israel, leftist purists, Christian Zionists opposing any territorial compromise by Israel and American Jewish rejectionists of a Palestinian state have something in common: They tend to see only one side's sins. These groups are challenging President Obama's helpful diplomacy at this time, risking more death and violence for generations to come.

It is crucial that U.S. Jews and our allies — those who support the national aspirations of both Israelis and Palestinians — come forward now to make our voice heard. Visit www.btvshalom.org and click on the "We've Got Your Back President Obama" logo to participate in Brit Tzedek v'Shalom's pledge campaign.

*Ellen Rifkin
Eugene-Springfield Chapter Leader*

Brit Tzedek v'Shalom

BE POLITE, PROTESTERS

As a longtime private security professional who has made hundreds of citizen's arrests for a wide variety of retail crimes, a martial artist of 16-plus years, and an on again/off again social activist concerned about issues surrounding personal safety and self-defense, I have become troubled by an apparent absence of discretion regarding responsibility in relation to personal safety that has developed among many of Eugene's protesters.

For better or for worse, there are social norms by which average Americans view the world. As laws tend to support these norms, by definition, law enforcement can and should be expected to maintain them. When they are flouted, even when done so without malice or ill intent, it should come as no surprise when cops respond to the act.

Ultimately, only you are responsible for your own safety in life. This doesn't change when you attend a protest. If you argue that the police get paid to "protect and serve" and shouldn't cause you harm for expressing your First Amendment rights, I would like to point out that the Supreme Court has ruled that law enforcement has no constitutional responsibility to protect you.

If you fear being unjustly arrested, or if you fear becoming a victim of police harassment or excessive use of force, think about what you can do, regardless of a police presence, to avoid the event entirely.

Police behavior and the training that develops are relatively predictable and largely appropriate for the environment and people they regularly encounter.

*David Pirie
Eugene*

OFFICER OF THE YEAR?

Hippie hoodlums terrorize Eugene with dangerous protests and crazy antics. It sure is a good thing Officer Judd Warden was around to save the day by using excessive force and arresting the wicked Ian Van Ornum last May. Does that display Officer

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