

BETTER THERAPY AHEAD

I thank Catherine Burke-Maher for her thoughtful reply [12/19] to my letter [12/12] on the “Cuckoo’s Nest Option” for cleaning up downtown Eugene. While I do not feel wise, I am old enough to be the father of any reader here up to 70 years of age.

I don’t suppose I will ever fully recover from the shock of Ken Kesey’s great story. The personal experience you recount is parallel to that, but you do not say when that was. Since the new Oregon State Hospital (OSH) is still under construction, I do not know what it will be like; we do not have the facts. To say that it could be as bad as the old OSH is an uncertainty that we as citizens always face as part of the human condition.

But your comments raise an issue that is sorely neglected. The citizens of Eugene should be on top of major issues related to the new OSH. The new OSH must be a lot better than the old OSH in treating mental illness. If not, the citizens should march up to Junction City and burn it down. Starting with Gov. Kitzhaber, I feel some hope that Oregon can be a national leader in the humane treatment of mental illness.

We incarcerate people all the time for many reasons. But if mental health is too circumscribed for incarceration, when it is needed for the public good, this is not an absolute judgment. It is a question of alternatives. In Eugene the alternative may be the worst choice, because there is no alternative.

What we have are anecdotes. After a nice lunch at Poppi’s Anatolia, I was walking downtown on Willamette on a

cold December day when a corpulent man with a big beard approached me. Every inch of him was dirty. His clothes were torn and flapping in the wind. He was barefoot and his feet were the dirtiest part. He carried a cardboard sign that said something like: “Look at me, I am dirty.” I call him “DirtyE.”

Now DirtyE’s civil rights may entitle him to be anywhere in the city. But the citizens of Eugene are entitled to have a clean and attractive downtown, which they are paying for. I have great empathy for the police officers that we ask to monitor the homeless population so that we can have an attractive city.

Another example: I quote from the Civil Liberties [Defense Center] section of the *EW* [Give Guide] Dec. 19. “a local homeless man with severe bipolar disorder and psychosis ... was forced to endure inhumane conditions and was critically injured while incarcerated in Lane County Adult Correctional Facility for 13 days.” I awake at night, hearing his screams.

The other issue raised by Burke-Maher is that Thomas Egan would not have decided to freeze to death, as she said I said. I will clarify, saying that Egan was doing what he wanted to do, and did not care if he froze to death. But who can know what Thomas Egan was really thinking when he lay down under a soft blanket of Christmas snow with a bottle by his side? A couple of days after his death, an obituary by a close friend appeared in the *R-G*. I have taken my views from that article.

J. C. Helmer
Eugene

MORE TREE HUGGERS

How about adding to the “Tree Huggers” section of your valuable Give Guide [12/19] our totally local WREN organization? A small nonprofit, the Willamette Resources and Educational Network last year helped over 1,350 elementary school children, plus over a thousand more community members and families, hug (metaphorically at least) the ducks, snakes, dragonflies and varied creatures of our rich West Eugene Wetlands. WREN (wewetlands.org) offers field trips, classroom programs and free Wetland Wanders and Family Exploration Days for the public.

Sara van Dyck
Eugene

MISINFORMATION

In response to Gwen Heineman’s multiple letters about Cover Oregon (10/24, 12/12): She is simply incorrect when she claims that the families of OHP recipients will be billed by the state after the person’s death. Members of the Oregon Health Plan will not be subject to estate recovery for coverage that starts Oct. 1, 2013, or later.

Ms. Heineman’s misunderstanding of the benefits offered by Cover Oregon is not uncommon. This is a complicated topic, and misinformation abounds. Working at White Bird Clinic as a Cover Oregon Community Partner, I deal with clients who have heard a wide variety of rumors regarding their health insurance options.

If you or anyone you know has questions about Cover Oregon, I encourage you to contact a certified agent or community partner. We can provide you with accurate, up-to-date information and assist you with your application.

In Lane County, these services are available at White Bird Clinic as well as at Community Health Centers of Lane County (Charnelton and Riverbend locations), Centro LatinoAmericano, and The Child Center. Contact information for community partner organizations can be found at coveroregon.com. Just click the link labeled “get free assistance.”

We are here to provide assistance and information, not to force anyone into choosing coverage that they feel is a poor fit.

Kate Wheeler
Program Coordinator
Sharing Healthcare Options Program
(SHOP)
White Bird Clinic

FILLING THE GAP

For six months now we have heard from the city that they need to “fill the gap.” Come Jan. 19 we will be given a choice of how we will want it filled to close the gap on next year’s budget. Six different choices!

All of them involve “cuts,” meaning, firing people. So who would you choose to unemployment in this economy?

No, you can’t talk about filling the gap with new revenue. It was decided last September that that was forbidden. We

NOTES FROM THE RIVERSIDE BY MARK HARRIS

30 Years an Oregonian

EDUCATION AND TALENT ARE A THREAT

This year marks my 30th year in Oregon. To celebrate, I took in a double feature which exemplifies the two poles of my Oregonian experience. *12 Years a Slave* and *Gravity*, both films helmed by directors of color. *12 Years* served to ground me in reality, while *Gravity* took me to my favorite fantasy: a world without borders, floating free among the stars. The reality of space, though, is that it has no breathable atmosphere, extremes of hot and cold and is always trying to kill you, nothing personal. Same with Oregon; sometimes we don’t like your kind.

Perhaps it is fitting that a British director and British leading man tell an American story which resonates today in contemporary Oregon and the rest of America. Britain did end slavery before America. A monarch of African descent sat on the British throne during our Revolutionary War (Charlotte Mecklenburg-Strelitz), and her granddaughter (Queen Victoria) decreed that any American slave who made it into Canada had the protection of the British military.

12 Years a Slave was directed by Steve McQueen, and stars Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northrup, an African-American citizen living in Saratoga, New York, who in 1841 was induced to go below the Mason-Dixon line, to Washington, D.C. He was drugged and kidnapped into slavery in Louisiana. This was not an

uncommon fate for free men of color, living under white supremacy. They were particularly targeted because their intellect often made them more threatening, because they dared to think of themselves as equal to whites. Northrup was a man of intellect, gracious manners and means, musically inclined, well traveled and of course literate. In slavery, other than his musical talent, his pride and his literacy marked him for death.

Northrup is portrayed as a tender husband, a loving gentle father and a man well respected in his community. McQueen is not heavy handed with his subject matter, slavery. He doesn’t shy away from the casual hair-trigger brutality nor the attempts of enslaved people to maintain their humanity, whether in tentative lovemaking or simply staying alive, while being whipped for the crime of acquiring soap after being raped.

Benedict Cumberbatch plays a “Good Massa” to Michael Fassbender’s “Bad Massa.” Like the difference between a drug dealer and a pimp: The former can stand by and allow brutality to occur, while the latter is sadistic and inventive in his drunken cruelty. Alfre Woodard does a turn as a former slave turned mistress of the plantation. While it was never shown, the Confederate flag waves in support of all those activities. Oregon is essentially a Southern state in the Northwest.

As an American citizen of African descent, it would have been illegal for Solomon Northrup to come to live in Oregon. It was the fact of his intellect and cross-cultural competency that made him and people like him threatening to figures like Samuel Thurston, Joseph Lane or their modern equivalents. As it remained illegal for him to live within the Eugene city limits before 1965 or be on the street after dark in Springfield, could he find employment as a college professor? Could he remain 30 years an Oregonian?

Mark Harris is an instructor and substance abuse prevention coordinator at LCC.

