

Missing the rain

By ED HUNT
For The Daily Astorian

When I was a small boy — the year before we moved out West — I remember a summer when some Californians came to visit.

On a warm summer day, the New Jersey sky opened up in an angry cascade of warm rain. This is a common occurrence back East. The rain would crash down in torrents from the coal-gray skies, pounding the mown lawns and the tidy streets of our neighborhood.

The Californians took off their shoes and ran out into the rain, dancing in their T-shirts, shorts and bare feet in the puddles that formed on hot sidewalks and concrete driveways.

It was the late 1970s and California had been in the midst of an epic drought.

They had been missing the rain.

In 1978, we moved with those Californians to the hills above Lyle, Wash. East side of the Cascades, but where the scrub oak are like pebbles on the shore of the vast desert ocean of Eastern Washington.

It is a place where the rain quits us in early May, never to return until late October. If you blink in that early spring, the green will be gone. Cloudless summer skies and blistering heat were the norm. Sun so bright it seemed to leap up from the ground to assault your eyes. Wind was oven hot and gave no relief. It curled in dust devils a mile away.

I remember one summer on High Prairie and I had a job pulling up fence posts along a property line with a boom truck. The metal of the barbed wire burned skin. We ate our lunches huddled in a sliver of thin shadow offered under by the frying-pan-hot truck.

It was a magical thing then to even see a ghost of a cloud far off a mountain's shoulder, even so, there was no promise of rain in it.

One summer we vacationed on the coast. Walked summer rain-soaked streets of Ilwaco, blue tarps rustling on hulls in the boatyard. Watercolor skies and swirling mists in late June when the grass back home had already dried to brown.

I married a local girl Grays River girl that I met at college. It was Amy that taught me the rhythms of the rain forest life. Past 20 years now, it has wrapped its ways around me like favored polar fleece and Gor-Tex.

In my little home among the Willapa Hills, we average more than 110 inches of rain each year, with 192 days of measurable rainfall. That is 30 inches a year more than the highest rainfall picked up in Portland and many surrounding communities. Indeed, the least amount of rain received at the Grays River hatchery — 75.9 inches in 1985 — was still higher than Portland's average yearly rainfall. (data up to 2006) Astoria averages less than 70 inches a year — but has the same number of rainy days at 191.

Thus the Grays River valley in particular — like Pluvius and Forks and Quillayute — lies in a perfect place for precipitation — inland just enough from the coast, tucked between the first ridges of hills that harvest the fresh clouds with their peaks.

I never tire of it.

It could rain 100 days in a row here — it often does — yet it can be different each day. This is a wild and dynamic meteorologic magic to which we are privileged.



Ed Hunt/For The Daily Astorian

This is right before the skies opened up in Grays River.



EO Media Group/File

A woman walks toward the rock embankment along U.S. Highway 101 in McGowan, Wash., in 2014 as heavy rains fell and winds blew waves of water onto the road.

I will not go on about its practical benefits: Yes it waters our gardens, grows our trees and feeds our river songs. It washes our streets, greens our fields.

It calls our salmon back from the ocean.

It hides our tears.

I write best, and most often in the rain. Sitting in my recliner looking out my window or stomping through the wet fields and forest brings relentless words to mind.

Conversely, I have been trained by my

time on the wet side of the state to associate a rainless day with outdoor projects and work to be done.

Seize the golden day between the storms. Make hay while the sun shines.

Comes now a year when a dry summer follows a dry spring, following a winter punctuated by an unusual number of sunny days. Good for motorcycles and horseback rides, for outdoor projects that usually would not even get started until mid-summer. Not so good for quiet contemplation at the keyboard.

Writer's Notebook

So it was this summer that my grass dried to brittle yellow before June had even past.

So it was that the cows and horses huddled in the shade rather than graze on the dwindling grass.

Then came a hint of a rainstorm on the weather forecast.

A summer storm at last.

I found myself in a state of anticipation, dashing around cleaning up the yard, watching the clouds gather. I could smell the air thickening, I longed for a growl of thunder to herald the coming rain.

When at last I awoke to that music on my metal roof I found strange joy in the predawn hours knowing the rain had finally come. Later that morning, I went down and took up my book by the window. I smiled but did not read. I simply looked out at the gray.

I wanted to go out then, in the summer storm.

I wanted to take off my shoes

I had been missing the rain.

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Lessons from the murders of the TV journalists

By NICHOLAS KRISTOF
New York Times News Service

The slaying of two journalists Wednesday as they broadcast live to a television audience in Virginia is still seared on our screens and our minds, but it's a moment not only to mourn but also to learn lessons.

The horror isn't just one macabre double-murder, but the unrelenting toll of gun violence that claims one life every 16 minutes on average in the United States. Three quick data points:

- More Americans die in gun homicides and suicides every six months than have died in the last 25 years in every terrorist attack and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq combined.

- More Americans have died from guns in the United States since 1968 than on battlefields of all the wars in U.S. history.

- American children are 14 times as likely to die from guns as children in other developed countries, according to David Hemenway, a Harvard professor and author of an excellent book on firearm safety.

Bryce Williams, as the Virginia killer was known to viewers when he worked as a broadcaster, apparently obtained the gun used to murder his former co-workers Alison Parker and Adam Ward in response to the June massacre in a South Carolina church — an example of how gun violence begets gun violence. Williams may have been mentally disturbed, given that he videotaped Wednesday's killings and then posted them on Facebook.

"I've been a human powder keg for a while . . . just waiting to go BOOM!!!!," Williams reportedly wrote in a lengthy fax sent to ABC News after the killings.

Whether or not Williams was insane, our policies on guns are demented — not least in that we don't even have universal background checks to keep weapons out of the hands of people waiting to go boom.

The lesson from the ongoing carnage is not that we need a modern prohibition (that would raise constitutional issues and be impossible politically), but that we should address gun deaths as a public health crisis. To protect the public, we regulate toys and mutual funds, ladders and swimming pools.



Nicholas Kristof

Shouldn't we regulate guns as seriously as we regulate toys?

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration has seven pages of regulations concerning ladders, which are involved in 300 deaths in America annually. Yet the federal government doesn't make what I would call a serious effort to regulate guns, which are involved in the deaths of more than 33,000 people in America annually, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (that includes suicides, murders and accidents).

Gun proponents often say things to me like: What about cars? They kill, too, but we don't try to ban them!

Cars are actually the best example of the public health approach that we should apply to guns. Over the decades, we have systematically taken steps to make cars safer: We adopted seatbelts and air bags, limited licenses for teenage drivers, cracked down on drunken driving and established roundabouts and better crosswalks, auto safety inspections and rules about texting while driving.

This approach has been stunningly successful. By my calculations, if we

had the same auto fatality rate as in 1921, we would have 715,000 Americans dying annually from cars. We have reduced the fatality rate by more than 95 percent.

Yet in the case of firearms, the gun lobby (enabled by craven politicians) has for years tried to block even research on how to reduce gun deaths. The gun industry made a childproof gun back in the 19th century but today has ferociously resisted "smart guns." If someone steals an iPhone, it requires a PIN; guns don't.

We're not going to eliminate gun deaths in America. But a serious effort might reduce gun deaths by, say, one-third, and that would be 11,000 lives saved a year.

The United States is an outlier, both in our lack of serious policies toward guns and in our mortality rates. Hemenway calculates that the U.S. firearm homicide rate is seven times that of the next country in the rich world on the list, Canada, and 600 times higher than that of South Korea.

We need universal background checks with more rigorous screening, limits on gun purchases to one a month to reduce trafficking, safe storage requirements, serial number markings that are more difficult to obliterate, waiting periods to buy a handgun — and more research on what steps would actually save lives. If the federal government won't act, states should lead.

Australia is a model. In 1996, after a mass shooting there, the country united behind tougher firearm restrictions. The Journal of Public Health Policy notes that the firearm suicide rate dropped by half in Australia over the next seven years, and the firearm homicide rate was almost halved.

Here in America, we can similarly move from passive horror to take steps to reduce the 92 lives claimed by gun violence in the United States daily. Surely we can regulate guns as seriously as we do cars, ladders and swimming pools.

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