

OPINION



the Astorian

editor@dailyastorian.com

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KARI BORGEN
Publisher

DERRICK DePLEDGE
Editor

JEREMY FELDMAN
Circulation Manager

JOHN D. BRUIJN
Production Manager

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GUEST COLUMN

The coronavirus takes no prisoners

Mum is dead.
Thanks to the virus.
And thanks to the virus, I will not be there to say goodbye.
I will not be there to thank her for the gift of life.
I will not be there to hug my family as we grieve her loss.
I will not be there.

The coronavirus takes no prisoners. Like pirates who raise the black flag, it descends on lungs and rips them through with its cutlass.

She was diagnosed on a Sunday, and dead by Wednesday.

She died just before this nation hit the 100,000 mark; Great Britain has about 60,000.

But she is not a statistic. She was my Mum. My brother's first report from England pinged into my email at 5 a.m. on a Sunday. Residents at her residential care home were checked for COVID-19. "Guess who tested positive?" The following day, his update arrived at 4 a.m. "She's stopped taking antibiotics (not that they can help against the virus), stopped eating, stopped drinking, stopped any and all taking of any medication and apart from the fact that she's currently hanging in there, is not responding to anyone or anything."

I spent the following two days staring at my phone — something I ridicule in snarky Facebook posts.

She is 94. Our family has known death must be looming, just not the "how" or the "when."

But this? How does a "mummy's boy" prepare for the death of the woman who gave him life?

He doesn't, of course. I was pretty sure during my visit in



During the early 1960s, Patrick Webb's career dream was a cowboy. The journalism idea came later.

February that I wouldn't see Mum alive again. Oddly, though, when the pandemic hit, I had a notion that this elfin woman who had survived Hitler's bombs, serious adult health scares and nine decades worrying about everyone else would survive.

No. When I squeezed her gnarled hand in our final goodbye, I noticed Mum had a red-bordered "Do Not Resuscitate!" order Scotch-taped to her bedside furniture. She repeatedly maintained she was "ready to pop off."

During the wait, I kept myself busy updating letters I had written four years ago, ready for when needed. I changed my chatty, "see you soon" finale to, "No idea on any funeral yet because of the coronavirus restrictions."

I have lived in the United States for 40 years. In the first decade, I welcomed Mum and Dad three times and shared pride in my new homeland. Since the

1990s, I have visited them every year, watching them age and Dad die, delighting in their retirement hobbies, allowing them to quiz me about American differences in language, food and beliefs.

I feel so far away from jolly olde England now.

What am I supposed to think or do?

Am I supposed to remember the good things about my life and Mum's role in them? I was nearly born at 4 a.m. in an ambulance; Mum laughs at the memory, which must have been painful. Boyhood summers were highlighted by one-week seaside vacations. Faded black-and-white photos celebrate Webb family adventures on pebbled beaches with grinning normalcy. Soon, they will be all that remain. She taught me to read and to love to read. Words have been my entire life, and yet, as the cliché goes, I am lost for them now.

The next day's report is grim. An early

morning call from the care home signals Mum's breathing was labored; staff invite one final visit. My brother reports that Mum, withered, rasping, didn't seem aware he and his wife were there. They endure 20 minutes. After driving home, they work in their garden, therapy of a kind, awaiting the second call.

It did not take long. My notification, just before midnight U.S. time, was simple. "Your phone is not accepting calls. Mum passed away at 5 this morning." My reply brings the first lump to my throat. "Take care, mate. Just you and me now."

In "usual times," I would have called United Airlines, wheedling for a ticket without paying the short-notice surcharge, grabbed my packed suitcase, and trekked to PDX and Heathrow. Instead, I trot down the hall and plug in the kettle. That's what British people do, unfailingly. A scalding cup of tea with milk and sugar has magical properties like hugging a favorite teddy bear.

After an oddly untroubled night's sleep, I seal 27 preprinted letters then phone my two cousins. No one is surprised; all are sad. They ask about a funeral, because they must, but they anticipate my answer. I wrote Mum's funeral eulogy eight years ago, flying home from mourning Dad. Practicing alone in my car has reduced it to 11 minutes; I will never deliver it.

COVID-19 has another victim. Diagnosed on a Sunday, dead by Wednesday.

But this is not a statistic.

My Mum is dead.

And I will not be there to say goodbye when her tiny coffin rolls up the conveyor belt at the crematorium to the music of Glenn Miller.

It will be watched by just five people. Socially distanced, of course. Because of the virus.

Patrick Webb is a former managing editor of *The Astorian*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Past stupidities

Brenda Penner's letter, "Thoughtful" (*The Astorian*, June 4), citing a recent editorial, "Let's learn from our tragic blunder" (*The Astorian*, May 28), made me go back and reread the editorial.

I agree with the letter writer's statement the editorial is "thoughtful, insightful, (and) prescient." More folks around here should read it. But my agreement with the letter writer ends there.

President Donald Trump inherited a real mess, brought on by years of neglect and stupidity of career politicians of both parties. The editorial recites only a few of those mistakes. But none of them were caused in any way by President Trump, who's not a professional career politician.

I can't think of anybody in my lifetime who could do what President Trump has done to try to resolve past stupidities of Washington, D.C., politicians. And I especially can't think of any other politician who could withstand the constant attacks and negativity from the most biased, unprofessional and dishonest national media of my lifetime.

President Trump shows restraint in using our military to quell present-day rioting and looting. That's commendable. In a federal system, governors and mayors of rioting cities and states should handle the situation.

If President Trump needs to employ troops, there's plenty of precedent for that. Presidents Dwight Eisenhower, Lyndon Johnson and John Kennedy did so. And so did President George Bush in 1992, during the riots in Los Angeles.

I join many millions of Americans who're proud of the domestic and foreign policies President Trump follows. These days our feckless "ruling class" needs to pay attention.

DON HASKELL
Astoria

Gold standard

Regarding the letter "Not the cure" (*The Astorian*, May 23), I need to be clear: The Cornell University study on a sustainable human population of 2.5 billion is the gold standard. The United Nations stated that this study allowed for a decent standard of living.

You can find other studies that calculated food resource for as many as 10 billion humans, but the standard of living would be greatly reduced (UN World Population Monitoring 2017). You could also conclude that environmental damage would be much greater, and extinction of species much greater at 10 billion vs. 2.5 billion.

Food is not the only resource in jeopardy from too many people. The Nature Conservancy reported that 10 cities in the

world are expected to exceed water supply capacity by 2030, including Los Angeles, San Diego and Phoenix. Humans will go to great lengths of rationalization to avoid taking reproductive responsibility. They would rather begin desalinating sea water than reducing birth rates.

The U.S. is calculated by the UN to have the eighth-fastest growing population in the world going forward. It is not because our fertility rate is too high (1.76 children per female), it is mostly because we are an immigration safety valve for other countries where high birth rates exceed job creation rates, leading to poverty.

Making contraception available everywhere to everyone is the only way to bring down birth rates, abortion rates and immigration, not draconian moral regulation.

DAVE FITCH
Astoria

Humane

Iagree with the main point expressed by Rodney Merrill ("Correct a wrong") and David Isaacs' ("Not Astoria") letters in the June 2 issue of *The Astorian*.

Why forego a \$45 wage increase for those at the lowest pay scale if the funds can be found elsewhere in the budget,

including from those being paid at much higher levels? Balance the budget without hurting those who are least able to afford it. Government should be humane where it can.

FRANK SATTERWHITE
Astoria

Without a leader

This is, for the most part, a selfish rant. Right now, I don't know what else to do.

The country is now clearly without a leader. Major crises have beset us during recent months, each posing a greater threat to our cities and citizens than the last, and the current occupant at 900 Pennsylvania Ave. is absent, except for an occasional toothless threat via internet, or venal verbal attack in a televised tantrum.

As unemployment numbers exceeding those of the Great Depression are tallied, more Americans have died of an out-of-control virus than in any other country, and cities are ablaze in turmoil following another in a series of unchecked hate crimes — this at the hand of a government agent — our president is in hiding.

What has become vividly clear is that at a time when one of our sad country's great-

est needs is for leadership, President Donald Trump simply has nothing to offer. Berkeley's professor of social policy, Robert Reich, said: "Trump's nonfeasance goes far beyond an absence of leadership or inattention to traditional norms and roles. In a time of national trauma, he has relinquished the core duties and responsibilities of the presidency."

It is pathetic what we have allowed to happen to our country.

GREG LAVIN
Astoria

Taking note

I just returned from a walk on the beach at Del Rey Beach State Recreation Site. I took note of the speed limit sign. It said 25 mph. This is the speed limit in Astoria.

School zones are 20 mph, when lights are flashing or children are present. Yet at the beach, where pedestrians and children share the same patch of ground, vehicles are allowed to go 25 mph.

What is the logic behind this? As the weather warms, and the crowds on the beach grow, it would seem that a slower speed for vehicles would be safer for all.

JENNIFER NIGHTINGALE
Astoria

AN AWKWARD MOMENT AT THE REMOVED STATUE PARTY



KUPER

"I used to be at the old Penn Station, what did you do?"