

“I first thought of the idea as a writing exercise for people to participate in Oregon Humanities magazine,” said Ben Waterhouse, communications manager for Oregon Humanities and creator of the “Dear Stranger” project. “I thought it would be interesting for people to put down on paper their feelings and to share with others through the magazine.”

“I was really wrong about that,” Waterhouse added. “It was the person-to-person exchange that people liked — sharing what they encountered in their day to day lives. That was what connected people.”

Waterhouse pressed that the need for human connection seems to be more urgent than ever due to the pandemic.

“In previous years, we averaged about 100 people participating in the letter writing, ranging in ages from 6 to 80, but last year 275 people signed up and exchanged letters with strangers,” Waterhouse said. “The idea is for Orego-

nians to connect, but we had letter writers from 29 states, Italy and Belgium.”

At the suggestion of the Coast Weekend editor, I signed up to partake in the process last summer. The prompt was to “write about the climate where you live — the weather, politics or culture.”

At first, the topic was challenging. I was writing a letter to someone unknown to me, not a friend that I’d been corresponding with for decades. Now I was challenged to thoughtfully explain where it was I lived, and what was happening, both internally, and in my specific environment. What to say? How to say it?

Then, a young bear running through

my yard gave me inspiration.

Suddenly, all the wonders of where I lived on the western side of the Cascades, in the woods on a river, conjured a poem of thanks. Yet, it conjured too, the emotional toll of clear-cutting timber for new developments, the bears and cougars with no place to go, and my own fear of fire or flooding caused by deforestation.

With no escaping changes, we woodland creatures are all thrown in it together.

I sent my letter off and a few weeks later I received a long, hand-written letter from a woman in Eastern Oregon who described the joys of living in that vast landscape, and yet, her emotional rollercoaster of diminishing water resources. As ranch-

ers, could they survive?

Strangers no more, we were connected.

“It feels like we’re in a constant state of crisis, with fires and the pandemic and partisan conflict, and that makes it really hard to reach out and learn from other people,” added Waterhouse. “‘Dear Stranger’ is connecting people to learn from one another. It takes time and intention to sit down and compose a letter. But it is direct, easy to access, rewarding and powerful.”

Waterhouse is right.

The prompt for the newest round of letter writing is now open for writers, focused on the theme, “beyond.”

Oregonians are asked to write about what lies beyond the here and now. When you think of the future, what do you see? Think about yourself, your life, your surroundings, the world in general. What are your hopes, your fears, your dreams?

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Left, A collection of letters submitted through the ‘Dear Stranger’ project. Right, The project is open to all Oregonians.