

OPINION



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Charred forest has lessons to teach

Two years after a major fire raged through the woods at Siouxxon Creek, the mast-straight Douglas firs still look like their lower trunks were dipped into a bath of black tar.

Their thick bark charred by the flames, their needles singed and consumed by the 25,000-acre firestorm, thousands of firs stand as a wooded charnel house, a ghost forest of the standing dead.



ANDRE STEPANKOWSKY

Despite all that, joy and hope washed over me as I hiked through the scorched Siouxxon Valley in Washington state this month.

It wasn't just the power of nature to heal itself that awed me. This forest, and how it has begun stitching itself back together, reminded me of something deeper needed to soothe our national strife.

The so-called Hollow Creek fire started on Sept. 8, 2020 and grilled most of the upper Siouxxon watershed, a popular hiking area south of Swift Reservoir about a dozen miles south of Mount St. Helens.

By the time crews and rain stopped the blaze in early October, all the forest underbrush of wood sorrel, ferns, maple, huckleberry, devil's club and other shrubs lay in cinders. Even the moss burned, leaving behind swaths of velvety orange that still blotch the rocks and soils of the forest floor.

Yet, despite the scant passage of time, the forest is rebounding. Splotches of wood sorrel and other herbaceous plants are again covering the forest floor. Jungles of fireweed — the pink-purple flowered species that is a post-fire colonizer — thrive under the canopy of the skeletal forest. Emerald green now dominates the understory, which was a smoking, cinder-laden ruin two autumns ago.

Siouxxon Creek and its tributaries again gurgle and clatter over rocks and gravel with aquamarine-tinged purity.



Nicky Stepankowsky and Robert Grant walk through the forest in the Siouxxon Creek watershed in August.

Although most of the tall firs died, patches of them survived in wet spots or where winds shifted flames away. Some miraculously endured even though their bark, burned to the appearance of charcoal, was thick enough to shield them from the heat. These survivors will be the source of seed to sow a new forest.

The newborn forest will be more structurally complex and biologically richer than the old one, which was largely an even-aged woodland that sprung from disastrous fires in the early 20th century.

We learned from Mount St. Helens and other disasters that survivors of a natural calamity drive the healing of the land. It's obvious that these so-called legacies — seeds, roots, surviving animals, colonizing birds, insects and mammals from outside the burn area — are at play in the the Siouxxon Creek watershed.

In a broad sense, the forest is regrowing from its roots. Come to think of it, I was reminded, isn't it our own roots — in the form of memories, families, schooling and a myriad of other accumulated experiences — that help us cope and regroup after we endure a setback? The power of memory is immense, and we lose our moorings when it wanes.

So, too, isn't it time for America to return to its roots to help heal the political divisiveness that poisons our politics? We must remember who we are and what makes us great. We need to return to Superman's playbook and rededicate ourselves to "truth, justice and the American way," where politics is a vehicle for progress and not a bludgeon for demeaning the opposition. We're better and richer when we work together.

I didn't revisit Siouxxon Creek for a civics lesson, because like many of you I'm disgusted with political acrimony. But the land speaks to us, often in ways we don't expect.

Andre Stepankowsky is the retired city editor of *The Daily News of Longview, Washington*.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

An act of compassion

On a recent morning on KMUN, Jerry Middaugh opened his program by playing the Ukrainian national anthem, followed by a song reminding us that "we are all Ukrainians now." It was a good thing to do, even if it was a painful subject to revisit.

Then, for two hours, he rescued us. He played, for instance, a tragic but acoustically beautiful cello piece performed by Nancy Blake. And later, a song by the exuberantly unstoppable Marcia Ball. And, a gentle reminder by Laurie Lewis that "a hand to hold" makes all the difference. It was music that acknowledged sorrow, but encouraged us to look beyond it.

The choices and sequencing and balancing of the songs couldn't but have come from the programmer's life experiences. Sharing them in this way was, it seems to me, an act of compassion.

ROBERT ADAMS
Astoria

Heavens

A message from the heavens: The North Star is to guide us, the Big Dipper to ladle ourselves generous helpings of His love and blessings, and the Little Dipper to remind us to be thankful, no matter how little we may have.

The smiling moon is to consume our gloom, and the sun to always shine on us, to warm our hearts and souls. Thank you, Lord, for your heavens!

JIM BERNARD
Warrenton

Dread

For a long time, I have felt a steadily increasing dread that Americans are becoming super dependent on manufactured drugs to "fix" health issues. Yes, proper medications are required to address diagnosed medical issues. But what I have been seeing are the Big



LETTERS WELCOME

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crazy.

Over a one-week period of watching TV during the 5:30 to 7 p.m. news shows, I counted 30 different medical products. Most of them were advertised six to 10 times each during that period. It was also interesting to hear of possible side effects. Death as a potential side effect would be a turnoff for me.

With this advertising process, Big Pharma was raking in major dollars. Pfizer alone made \$27.7 billion last quarter.

Hopefully, the legislation allowing Medicare to negotiate drug prices will have some effect on drug costs.

LEE JETTE
Astoria

Pharma companies producing and marketing a huge variety of products that

will "fix" problems. "Ask your doctor" about this product must drive doctors