



The solace of lonely places

By KRISTA LANGLOIS
Writers on the Range

“Every day I live in awe. Ahhhhh!”

— Mark

A broken-footed fisherman with a team of 26 sled dogs, filled with wonder to be living in empty Alaska

The man pulls back the tarp, and I’m staring at a seal carcass. Two seal carcasses, actually. They’re 250 pounds apiece, laid out head-to-tail with a neat bullet wound through each head. Their congealed blood glows, drops of rubies on the blue tarp.

I’ve encountered a lot of seals in Alaska, but I’ve never seen one so close — or so dead. Where a knife has sliced through to bleed them out, the blubber is two inches thick. It’ll be used to make seal oil, hard to come by in Anchorage these days, to be gobbled by the spoonful like peanut butter from the jar. Wayne shows me pictures on his iPhone of crafts he makes from speckled seal fur. The creases of his fingers are stained with blood.

This is where I’ve come after being dumped. Hard. Instead of fleeing someplace warm and comfortable, I’ve quit my job and joined what feels like a pilgrimage of heartbroken dreamers staggering toward Alaska. Why, I wonder, when our hearts are as raw as a piece of meat pecked at by ravens, are we drawn to one of the most unforgiving places imaginable? Do we crave a landscape as exposed and wind-scoured as we feel, or has Alaska simply always attracted such people?

Whatever the case, I met my friend Kate in Anchorage and drove as far south as the road would take us, to the end of the Homer Spit. In summer, the spit is packed with tourists, but now, in April, the storefronts are boarded up and the RV crowd still home plotting their vacations. There are a few scraps of paper on the bulletin boards from young men looking for work, and a lone moose wandering the alders. Brown marsh grasses whisper dryly. Yet the light dances from a sun that lingers late in the sky, hinting at the season to come.

Kate and I began talking to the three Native men because we needed a corkscrew. I asked if they were fishing. No, the one named Wayne said: hunting. Then he pulled back the tarp and showed us the seals.

Wayne answers my questions slowly, a cigarette dangling from his lips. His camo jacket is too big, his hair long and wavy. His two cousins are older and rounder, with thick hair and black mustaches. They tell us

they’re Eskimos from Nome, now living in Anchorage, and every April when the water is free of ice but the seals still have their winter blubber, they come here to hunt.

We drink wine from tin cups, and the twilight spirals on. We’re joined around our fire by the other men camping here alone in this strange season between snowmelt and summer. There’s a man with 26 sled dogs chained to a trailer who impulsively drove to Alaska two weeks ago; a cocky 30-year-old fisherman with a broken foot drinking away his workers’ comp checks; and Mark.

Mark has lived most his life in Hawaii and hasn’t seen his daughter in 10 years, but is filled with wonder to be living here in the clean, salty air. “Every day I live in awe,” he says, tilting his face toward the sky: “Ahhhhh!”

He walks with one stiff leg, swinging it out like a pirate’s peg. His face is crevassed with wrinkles.

His teeth are yellow, his beard stained white, his eyes the same icy blue as his husky’s. Limping around camp to throw wood on the fire or break up a dogfight, he bursts into song: “Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band,” Bob Marley. We are all living in awe.

None of us, not even the Eskimos, are from here. We each came to this barren stretch of land for our own reasons, and yet we came for the same reasons: For the stark white mountains and the cold depths of the sea and all the dreams and fears locked away in those secret places. For the freedom and adventure of being at the end of the road, beyond the clogged highways and parking lots and climate-controlled offices. But there’s loneliness too, a loneliness that everyone, after a few cups of wine, begins to reveal. It’s the one thing that binds us, young and old, male and female, sitting around a driftwood fire, feeling the pull of Alaska and the weight of what we’ve left behind.

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Colorado a year after legalization

By ART WAY
Drug Policy Alliance

It has been a full year in which adults were allowed to purchase marijuana from state-regulated dispensaries in Colorado.

We’ve already passed the two-year mark allowing adults to possess an ounce of marijuana and use privately. Some Coloradans have chosen to cultivate marijuana legally for the last two years.

Other than these groundbreaking policies, what’s really changed?

As a Colorado native simply looking around, I’m inclined to say not much. As a criminal justice reformer focusing on drug policy I know plenty has changed.

According to state data, marijuana possession charges in Colorado for 2014 are on track to fall below 2,500, down from nearly 30,000 in 2010. Data from the National Incident Based Reporting System reveals that arrests for marijuana possession were responsible for 80 percent of all marijuana arrests in Colorado over the last five years.

Over the last two years, NIBRS data reveals a 41 percent decrease in all drug arrests in the state. This drop can be attributed to allowing adults to possess, cultivate and privately use marijuana.

What else has changed? The state’s once-tightly regulated medical marijuana industry is now a tighter regulated retail industry. The medical marijuana regulatory framework enforced by the Colorado Department of Revenue was refined to tax and regulate the retail market. As of October, Colorado brought in more than \$40 million in marijuana taxes.

The bulk of this revenue will go toward youth prevention efforts focused on marijuana and overall mental health.

Already, we’re seeing dividends. The early returns after a year of decriminalization in 2013 are favorable showing a slight decline in youth use rates.

Colorado also has seen an economic boost since legalization. Colorado is ranked as one of the fastest growing economies. The unemployment rate is at its lowest since 2008, well below the national

average. Google has received the go-ahead to open a state of the art facility in Boulder.

Also, traffic fatalities are near historic lows, and slightly lower than what we saw in 2013.

I’m not claiming a direct causation to marijuana legalization, but marijuana legalization certainly has not hurt Colorado.

Marijuana was essentially removed from law enforcement’s

playbook of self-serving, ineffectual drug war tactics. Police have historically used marijuana prohibition as an excuse to intrude on the lives of law-abiding civilians. The story of Alex Landau here in Colorado is a prime example.

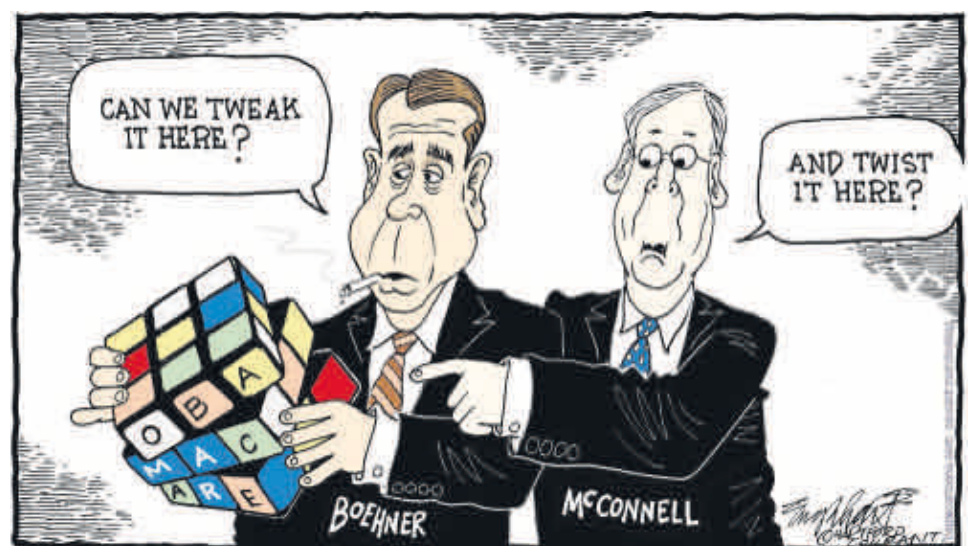
As a former police accountability advocate, I’m reminded that plenty has changed since ending marijuana prohibition in our state. Police are now forced to change their ways and simply focus on whether or not there is imminent public safety harm due to marijuana use.

I’m most pleased as a civilian and father to discover that not a lot has changed. More importantly, the sky didn’t fall as many naysayers predicted.

Colorado is being real and facing the fact marijuana is here to stay. In doing so, we are establishing a public health approach to minimize the potential harms of marijuana.

Art Way is the Colorado state director for the Drug Policy Alliance.

Marijuana legalization has certainly not hurt Colorado. It has brought in more than \$40 million in taxes.



It’s back to the future in Washington, D.C.

It’s a new year in Washington, and I cannot tell you how harmonious things are looking.

“There’s plenty of common ground for bipartisan compromise,” said Harry Reid, the new Senate minority leader. Well, not in person. Reid fell off an exercise machine at his house last week and he’s staying home until he no longer looks as if he was pummeled on his way to the cafeteria.

The Democrats’ second in command, Dick Durbin, promised that the Democrats would be “a much better minority” than the Republicans were. Meanwhile, the new majority leader, Mitch McConnell, promised to end Reid’s dictatorial tendencies and make the Senate “an engine for bipartisan achievement.”

McConnell and Reid both have a talent for depressing, cranky oratory. However, McConnell did interject a moment of levity when he suggested that the current rather remarkable strength of the U.S. economy was because of consumer ebullience over the election of a Republican majority in the Senate.

Anyway, everybody in the Senate vowed to improve on last year’s performance. Then they instantly launched into a debate on the Keystone XL oil pipeline.

Was this what you were hoping for, people? I know polls show

the majority of Americans support the oil pipeline, which when completed would run from Canada to the Gulf. I have also seen polls that show Americans like steak cooked medium and want Rex Ryan to be coach of the Atlanta Falcons. But nobody said either one should be the top national priority.

What’s the rush? The pipeline’s not going anywhere until a Nebraska court case gets worked out. And oil futures are currently down to around \$50 a barrel, while the Canadian pipeline oil needs to sell for about \$85.

Well, there are reasons. Passing the bill would make a lot of political donors happy. It would give senators a chance to demand that the United States, which became the No. 1 oil producer in the world during the Obama administration, do something about energy independence. It’s a chance to talk about jobs, even though the actual permanent employment created by the pipeline would be about as large as the opening of a new highway tollbooth.

Most important of all, the bill has a number of Democratic supporters, allowing orators to use the word “bipartisan” about 20 times a minute.

Meanwhile, in the very same new spirit of amity, House Speaker John Boehner assured the members that they would march into the future



“on common ground, both in letter and in spirit.” This was right after his re-election. Yes, John Boehner is once again speaker of the House! Perhaps this was not on the top of your new-year wish-list either.

The Republican alternatives included Rep. Ted Yoho, the large-animal veterinarian from Florida who once argued that the Affordable Care Act was “racist” because it includes a tax on tanning beds. Another candidate was Rep. Louie Gohmert of Texas, who warned that Muslim extremists were sneaking pregnant women into the United States to give birth to babies who “could be raised and coddled as future terrorists.” The

rebel who got the most support, Rep. Daniel Webster of Florida, was nominated by Steve King of Iowa, the guy who complained about young undocumented immigrants with “calves the size of cantaloupes because they’re hauling 75 pounds of marijuana across the desert.”

“My door is always open,” the triumphant Boehner told the House. Then he added: “Now don’t get carried away with this, all right?”

We appreciate that attitude in Boehner. Also, we appreciate him refusing to back up Yoho when Yoho claimed the speaker had agreed with his theory about

tanning beds.

On the other hand, Boehner stayed behind the majority whip, Steve Scalise of Louisiana, who was re-elected despite the revelation that when he was a state legislator in 2002, he gave a speech to members of a white supremacy group.

“I know what’s in his heart,” the speaker said.

How do you feel about this one? Scalise said the appearance was a mistake, and it is true that many politicians could make a speech before an assembly of cabbages without noticing that there was anything unusual about the room. On the other hand, in 2004, Scalise was one out of only six people in the 104-member Louisiana House to vote against making Martin Luther King Day a state holiday.

Let’s hope that when we look back on the 114th Congress we don’t remember that the high point was John Boehner beating out Ted Yoho. In fact, a truly cynical mind might wonder if the whole rebellion wasn’t staged by Boehner partisans just to show how horrific the alternative was.

Boehner partisans, however, expressed dismay at the lack of team unity.

“I just think it’s disrespectful to the conference, and it’s politically immature,” said Rep. Tom Cole of Oklahoma. “We ought to be talking about Keystone ...”

Gail Collins joined The New York Times in 1995.



GAIL COLLINS
Comment