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OUR VIEW



Umatilla Indian Reservation Youth Leadership Council representatives Cece Hoffman, left, and Alyssa Farrow hurry to put on rain gear during a wet ride around the nation's capital aboard a tour bus during the White House Tribal Youth Gathering July.

Western tribes strive to keep the light alive

Growing up is hard enough without having to worry about your civilization going extinct.

In the summer 2015 edition of Gilcrease magazine, young Cherokee Tribe member Danielle Culp draws a quite brilliant metaphor about surviving within a maelstrom of worry about whether the culture that defines you is fading away.

“One of the scariest things for me to think about is the death of a star. Some stars are close enough that the light reaches us in minutes. Some stars are so far it takes tens of thousands of years for their light to travel to us. Like all things, stars die. If a star dies and it takes hundreds of years for the light to reach Earth we will see the light of that star even after it has passed. By the time that we realize it is gone it will have been gone a long time.

“I am afraid that cultures are like stars, that they can die too. We know they do, even if we do not like to admit it or talk about it. The original inhabitants of the eastern coast were some of the first ones to come in contact with the new explorers. There were some tribes that were wiped off the face of the planet. Either by disease or by the sword. Those cultures are lost in time. There was no one left to pass on their stories, their language, their legacy. I equate them to close stars, for we can see the immediate effect of their demise. I am afraid that other cultures have died and we are still seeing their light in present generations, but when we realize that they are truly gone it will be too late to save their memory. I know that this is not a happy thought, and if I allowed myself, it could be too big a burden to bear. Instead, I allow it to inspire me. It inspires me to fight for my culture to show the world that I am still here, that WE are still here. I refuse to let our light go out, because I want it to continue to shine in generations to come.”

My first boss was a full-blooded Cherokee, a profoundly likable Oklahoma man named Henry Gourd, whose name always comes easily to mind because he was distinctly pumpkin shaped. Living all my life in the West, I can’t gauge how common it is for white Americans in general to have such Native Americans in their lives. But certainly for me, after my parents decided to build a house just inside a reservation, it was inevitable that I’d have a stronger-than-ordinary interest in their fate. There have always been some whites who cross the line into being tribal groupies. I know far too much about their internal feuds, corruption, school bullying and other ordinary human foibles to so idolize Indian life. But it would be outright sinful to not pay attention when despair haunts too many Indian people, good folks just trying to have decent lives.

There are glimmers of hope dawning on the horizon, much of this light coming from people like Culp who aren’t defeated and who feel a renewed sense of direction.

The *Confederated Umatilla Journal’s* August issue reports on six Umatilla Youth Leadership Council members attending an inspirational gathering convened by the White House to improve the lives of native youth around the country. Visiting the capital ought to be a rite of passage we arrange for every young American — this would surely be a far better use of taxes than most of the



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ridiculous ways in which they are wasted. But for small-town teenagers from Indian Country, making connections at the center of national power and visiting the Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian might be the kind of spark needed to ignite a life of activism and political engagement.

Attendee Alyssa Farrow, secretary of the Umatilla youth council, reports being moved by First Lady Michelle Obama’s speech to the 1,000 participants in this first-ever White House Tribal Youth Gathering in early July. And youth council treasurer Cece Hoffman said, “I’m very thankful that we were able to represent our tribe and bring back knowledge and ideas for the future. It was an eye-opening experience I will never forget.”

Considering that it takes almost no effort at all to learn that reservation youth are among America’s most at-risk citizens, it’s head-spinning to think it’s taken until now for it to sink in at the top level that it was time to toss them a life ring. But good to see anyway.

It’s also emotionally affecting to read in the latest issue of *Archaeology* magazine about Yup’ik Tribe wooden dolls dating between 1540 and 1650 washing out of a prehistoric site destabilized by melting Bering Sea ice. Archaeologists mounted an emergency response to investigate the mound from which the dolls were emerging. Sometimes a couple of hundred of these figures, along with ritual masks and other well-preserved wooden objects, were recovered each day.

It is a strange but invigorating irony that destruction of a place so saturated with tribal history is reawakening local young people.

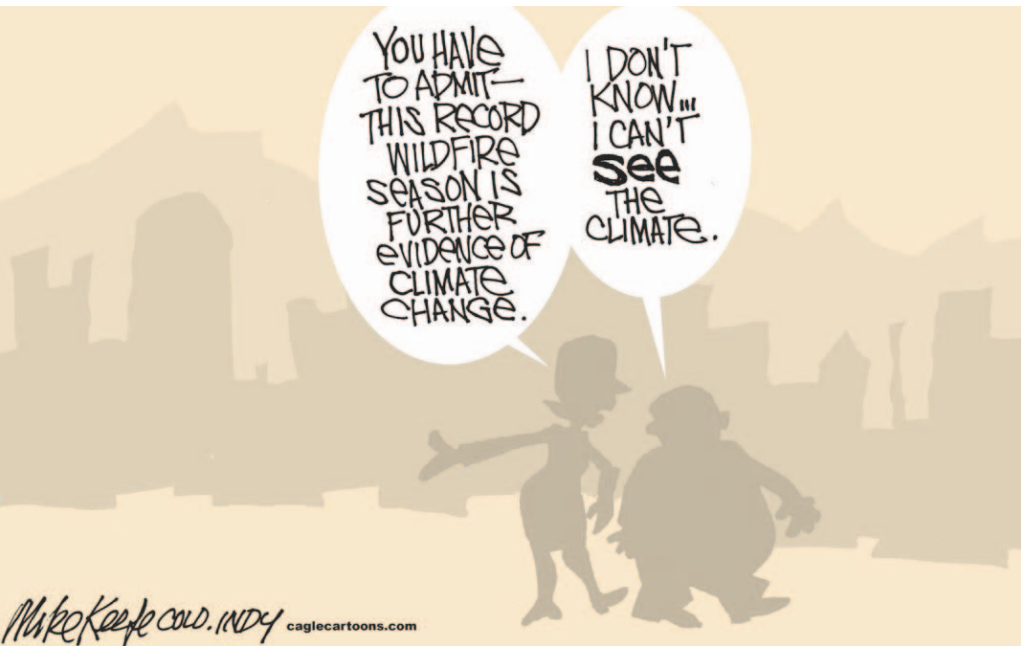
“In part as a result of their experience with the dig, a group of children from Quinhagak petitioned the elders for and received permission to form a traditional dance group,” the magazine reports. In 2013 at an exhibition of newfound artifacts, these young dancers performed. “They were welcoming the pieces back,” the lead archaeologist said. “That was the first time there had been traditional dancing in Quinhagak in more than a century. It’s all part of this revival that is growing along with the finds.”

A somewhat similar renewal of tribal identity happened near the mouth of the Columbia River when archaeologists uncovered Chinook tribal remains at the Middle Village unit of Lewis and Clark National Park in the run-up to the 2005 expedition bicentennial. This tangible evidence of their ancestors was sad for local tribal members, and yet at the same time appeared to strengthen their passion for asserting a right to endure and even prosper in the tribe’s traditional homeland.

Shamefully, this hasn’t ignited a similar interest on the part of national leaders to right wrongs against this essential Pacific Northwest tribe. A letter-writing campaign now in its 54th day has yet to elicit any response whatsoever from the White House.

The Chinook — and the Clatsop on the Oregon side of the river — continue hoping, in the words of the young Cherokee woman, to receive some acknowledgment that “We are still here.”

Matt Winters is editor of the *Chinook Observer* and *Coast River Business Journal*, sister papers of the *East Oregonian*.



OTHER VIEWS

The big decisions

Let’s say you had the chance to become a vampire. With one magical bite you would gain immortality, superhuman strength and a life of glamorous intensity. Your friends who have undergone the transformation say the experience is incredible. They drink animal blood, not human blood, and say everything about their new existence provides them with fun, companionship and meaning.

Would you do it? Would you consent to receive the life-altering bite, even knowing that once changed you could never go back?

The difficulty of the choice is that you’d have to use your human self and preferences to try to guess whether you’d enjoy having a vampire self and preferences. Becoming a vampire is transformational. You would literally become a different self. How can you possibly know what it would feel like to be this different version of you or whether you would like it?

In her book “Transformative Experience,” L.A. Paul, a philosophy professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, says life is filled with decisions that are a bit like this. Life is filled with forks in the road in which you end up changing who you are and what you want.

People who have a child suddenly become different. Joining the military is another transformational experience. So are marrying, changing careers, immigrating, switching religions.

In each of these cases the current you is trying to make an important decision, without having the chance to know what it will feel like to be the future you.

Paul’s point is that we’re fundamentally ignorant about many of the biggest choices of our lives and that it’s not possible to make purely rational decisions. “You shouldn’t fool yourself,” she writes. “You have no idea what you are getting into.”

The decision to have a child is the purest version of this choice. On average, people who have a child suffer a loss of reported well-being. They’re more exhausted and report lower life satisfaction. And yet few parents can imagine going back and being their old pre-parental selves. Parents are like self-fulfilled vampires. Their rich new lives would have seemed incomprehensible to their old childless selves.

So how do you make transformational decisions? You have to ask the right questions, Paul argues. Don’t ask, Will I like parenting? You can’t know. Instead, acknowledge that you, like all people, are born with an intense



DAVID BROOKS
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desire to know. Ask, Do I have a profound desire to discover what it would be like to be this new me, to experience this new mode of living?

As she puts it, “The best response to this situation is to choose based on whether we want to discover who we’ll become.”

Live life as a series of revelations. Personally, I think Paul’s description of the problem is ingenious but her solution is incomplete. Would you really trust yourself to raise and nurture a child simply on the basis of self-revelation? Curiosity is too thin, relativistic and ephemeral.

I’d say to really make these decisions well you need to step outside the modern conception of ourselves as cognitive creatures who are most sophisticated when we rely on rationality.

The most reliable decision-making guides are more “primitive.” We’re historical creatures. We have inherited certain life scripts from evolution and culture, and there’s often a lot of wisdom in following those life scripts. We’re social creatures. Often we undertake big transformational challenges not because it fulfills our desires, but because it is good for our kind.

We’re mystical creatures. Often when people make a transformational choice they feel it less as a choice and more as a calling. They feel there was something that destined them to be with this spouse or in that vocation.

Most important, we’re moral creatures. When faced with a transformational choice the weakest question may be: What do I desire?

Our desires change all the time. The strongest questions may be: Which path will make me a better person? Will joining the military give me more courage? Will becoming a parent make me more capable of selfless love?

Our moral intuitions are more durable than our desires, based on a universal standard of right and wrong. The person who shoots for virtue will more reliably be happy with her new self, and will at least have a nice quality to help her cope with whatever comes.

Which brings us to the core social point. These days we think of a lot of decisions as if they were shopping choices. When we’re shopping for something, we act as autonomous creatures who are looking for the product that will produce the most pleasure or utility. But choosing to have a child or selecting a spouse, faith or life course is not like that. It’s probably safer to ask “What do I admire?” than “What do I want?”

David Brooks became a *New York Times* Op-Ed columnist in September 2003.

YOUR VIEWS

Umatilla County jail treats inmates poorly

I am writing this from Umatilla County Jail. I’m serving a 90-day sentence for a misdemeanor driving while suspended violation.

I do not have a problem paying my dues for breaking the law. I do have a problem with the way inmates are treated here. I am listing below problems encountered by myself and most inmates I have talked to:

1. Four days sleeping on a concrete floor, overcrowded, no toothbrush, toothpaste or soap.
2. Less than 5 minutes to eat meals.
3. Very limited reading material. Books are torn up, missing pages.
4. Four phones in cell block. Only one works, and not always. Calls cost 10 times what they should and would on the outside.
5. Requests for medical attention have been ignored. I’ve been here for a month. They’ve had plenty of time to see me.
6. They keep our socks and do not give

us any to wear. Feet have become dry and cracking to the point of bleeding.

7. I’m hypoglycemic, and have requested proper nutrition for my condition. No response.
8. I have progressive, degenerative arthritis, am 56 years old and on disability. I have requested a bottom bunk and thicker mattress. Also ignored. I’m on a top bunk and have a mattress that should have been disposed of long ago.
9. Although it’s midsummer, cells are so cold most of the time I have to stay wrapped up in a blanket.
10. Have not received any mail although I know mail has been sent to me weeks ago.
11. No newspapers.

I can swear to everything I have listed is true and will stand by it as such. It is not right, and unjust, to treat a five-year veteran of the U.S. armed forces, honorably discharged, or any other U.S. citizen for that matter, in this way.

John Engebretson, Pendleton

LETTERS POLICY

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