

Standing for science and the arts

Coming out of the Safeway parking lot recently I was struck by the bumper sticker on the pickup ahead of me. GIVE INTELLIGENCE A CHANCE. Good idea, I thought. But what does it say about us, about our society, that we need to suggest this on a bumper sticker? That the idea is even a little bit controversial?

We haven't started killing anyone who wears glasses, as the Khmer Rouge did in Cambodia when they feared that such people might be intelligent, even educated. But we have had to march in support of science — 225 or more gathered in Pendleton last month on Earth Day, hundreds of thousands in cities around the world — and the word has been out for quite a while about the foolish folks who major in the humanities, literature and philosophy, art and music and history and such things.

Thinking about all this made me remember a happier time, back in the 1980s, when I accompanied three high school students from Joseph to a science and humanities conference in the Valley.

Michael and Martin and Mary and I saw slides taken over a geologist's shoulder, through the rear window of his pickup, as he fled the Mount Saint Helens eruption. I'll never forget the rapidity of that approaching fury. How was he to make sense of what

he had seen, he wondered, the incredible immensity of that power? And the limits of his own field, of human power? All those dead ...

That afternoon we heard a high school student read her prize-winning poems. Another student wondered why bumblebees

spend the night on thistle blossoms — the petals are prisms, he discovered, small solar power plants. On the way home the four of us talked about the way science and the humanities are a bit like the bilateral symmetry of our own bodies — left and right, yin and yang — discovery and interpretation equally essential.

I'm elated that people marched for science in our town, and I dare to dream that we might someday be willing to march for the humanities, too. For truth in all its forms.

Ideally, of course, we wouldn't have to march for either one.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, in his memoir "Between the World and Me," credits his mother with teaching him to question himself as well as others through the act of writing. She had made sure he learned to read when he was four, and when he was in trouble at school ("which was quite often"), the questions she gave him to answer — Why did he feel the need to talk at the same time as his teacher? Why did he not believe his teacher was entitled to respect? How

would he want someone to behave while he was talking? — forced him to interrogate himself, and by extension, begin to think about the motives and behavior of others.

At Howard University he would discover poets, and with them "an intensive version of what my mother had taught me all those years ago: the craft of writing as the art of thinking." Writing, he realized, was "ultimately, as my mother had taught me, a confrontation with my own innocence, my own rationalizations. Poetry was the processing of my thoughts until the slag of justification fell away and I was left with the cold steel truths of life."

So. Poetry. Who knew?

Still in his early 40s, Ta-Nehisi Coates, a national correspondent for Atlantic, is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, the Genius Grant. "Between the World and Me" won the 2015 National Book Award for nonfiction, and it was Oregon State University's Common Reading selection for incoming 2016-2017 first year students.

When I found a copy at the Pendleton Public Library, I realized why the selection committee's choice had been unanimous. Written as a letter to his then fifteen-year-old son after the death of Freddie Gray, the book is in many ways also a letter to America. Imagine the discussions we could have, I thought, if everyone read this book.

And imagine the society we could have, if all of us — like Coates' mother, an African-American woman raising her children in



BETTE HUSTED FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

the '80s-era violence of their Baltimore neighborhood — chose to give intelligence a chance.

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An Oregon gross receipts tax

By Yamhill Valley News Register

The governor and Legislature are battling on two fronts to balance the state budget for the next biennium. On the first, the government has no choice but to curb spending.

The Oregon Constitution requires the state to balance its budget every two years to prevent the kind of out-of-control debt and spending we see at the federal level. Accordingly, Gov. Kate Brown released a three-point plan last week to help cut a \$1.6 billion deficit by pruning expenditures.

Brown proposed a task force to identify elements that can be privatized or leveraged, impose market-driven compensation for salaries and crack down on unpaid tax obligations to the general fund, currently running half to three-quarters of a billion.

Many won't like the resulting cuts to services and grants, but they are essential. A bipartisan letter from the Ways and Means co-chairs said as much, noting, "Without action to contain the growing costs of state government now, the structural imbalance will cause even greater deficits in future years."

But over the long haul, cuts won't be enough. Changes to the tax code are needed in order to raise additional funds more efficiently.

Legislators seem set on a corporate gross receipts tax of 0.25 percent to 1.0 percent. And either would be much easier to swallow than that outlandish 2.5 percent written into

last year's failed Measure 97.

Oregon's current corporate income tax is abused by large corporations. There are myriad methods they can use to dodge net income numbers and take advantage of tax credits, thus incurring a smaller tax payment than warranted.

A gross receipts tax is much easier to manage on the state side and much more difficult to abuse on the business side. However, research shows corporate activities taxes tend to translate into higher prices for consumers. Ultimately, the company is able to pass on much of the burden.

That's particularly true of retailers with the capital to produce their own ingredients and create their own products — companies like WinCo, Safeway and Walmart. They enjoy a huge advantage over smaller, locally rooted businesses in passing costs along.

Secondly, a receipts tax can prove devastating for mid-range businesses, which may easily log \$5 million to \$10 million in sales without finishing the year in the black. They could be tagged with tax bills of \$50,000, \$100,000 or more despite turning no profit.

Unfortunately, there seem to be few alternatives on the horizon. As Sen. Mark Hass told *The Oregonian*: "If anyone has a better plan to look at how to reform and modernize corporate taxes, bring it forward."

For the sake of a healthy and diverse business community, we'd like to see something new emerge. In the meantime, it appears we're stuck with this one.

An exile returns to his roots

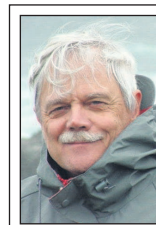
There's a place in the northeastern corner of Oregon that I've come to love: Zumwalt Prairie, between the Willamette Mountains and Hells Canyon. It supports one of the largest Buteo hawk breeding populations known on the continent, and contains the largest remaining bunchgrass prairie in North America.

The prairie is a nearly treeless expanse of low hills, plains, and swales. Wildflowers are abundant among the grasses, and in early summer there is an excess of color, as if some sloppy god had spilled his paints. The grasses sway not only to the wind, but also to the scurrying of ground squirrels, badgers and gophers, and to the predatory swoops of hawks and eagles.

This fecundity appears to make no sense. The soils are poorer than dirt. Euro-American settlers found the rocky earth too difficult to convert to cropland, so they put it beneath the hooves of cattle. Though not native, the cows mimicked an essential natural process. In pre-Columbian times, the prairie likely was maintained in an open condition by fire and grazing elk. (As far as is known, there had never been bison on Zumwalt Prairie.) Elk were nearly extinct in Oregon by the end of the 19th century, and cattle more than adequately filled the role of primary grazer.

Crucially, some ranchers learned that restricting when and where cattle grazed maintained the prairie's health. On several large tracts, no area was grazed during the same season in consecutive years, allowing the habitat to recover. Elk were reintroduced in the 20th century, and they now share the prairie with the cows. The Nature Conservancy reintroduced fire on its portion of the Zumwalt in 2005. The combination of grazing, manure, fire-created nutrients, nitrogen-fixing plants — and, ultimately, life's tenacious ability to wrestle nutrition from the most meager of soils — has produced a marvelous diversity of plants and animals.

During a visit in early July 2008, I saw one of the most beautiful and prolific wildflower displays of my life. About five minutes after I got out of the truck, a coyote started yipping at me from a low hill about 300 feet away. He or she kept it up for about 10 minutes; no doubt I was messing with its dinner plans.



RICHARD LEBLOND
Comment

Corpulent ground squirrels were everywhere, and I kept stepping into badger holes — a disconcerting experience. It seemed impossible to scan the sky and not see a hawk or eagle. To the east, the prairie dipped down into the complex of gorges heading to Hells Canyon, and to the southwest I could see the snow-capped Willamette Mountains over the shoulder of one of the Findley Buttes.

And the wildflowers were stunning. As I got down on my knees to try and identify them, I spontaneously said, "This is home."

That afternoon, I went to the bookstore/espresso bar in the nearby town of Enterprise to browse and hang out. During one of my brief conversations with the owner, I mentioned my experience on the prairie earlier that day. She handed me a chapbook

titled "The Zumwalt: Writings from the Prairie," a collection of essays, poems and historical accounts. In an essay by local resident Jean Falbo, I found a passage that resonated with my experience on the prairie that morning. The essay is titled "On Becoming Native to Place."

"Before us was a herd of elk, perhaps two hundred animals. They stood tensely still, eyes on us and ears radaring in our direction. Some voiceless decision was taken and the herd moved down slope like a brown mudslide against the dark yellow green grass, gaining momentum as they went. A more distant herd on Findley Butte caught the message and started its own slide over the undulating land and disappeared from view. A bright evening star appeared. 'This is A'gamyang,' one of my friends, a Central Yup'ik Eskimo, said. After a pause, he went on to say, 'It means 'I'm homesick for nowhere.' Seeing we didn't get it, he explained that at moments like these, his people said, 'A'gamyang' — meaning to be at one with the universe, no matter where one might be physically."

I know that feeling, and I am now a prairie volunteer. After 55 years of voluntary exile, I can now give something back to the state that raised me.

Richard LeBlond is a contributor to *Writers on the Range*, the opinion service of *High Country News*. A former inventory biologist for the North Carolina Natural Heritage Program, he grew up in Oregon.

Quick takes

Echo man faces eminent domain for sewer project

Will take if necessary? This is absolutely horrible, and extremely unfair.
— **Darby Keels**

Maybe offer to lease it from him; ensure that he and his kids can count on an additional revenue stream.
— **Douglas Rohde**

Pretty sad when someone works their life for what they have and because they do not want to sell the city of Echo will take it by force. How would the mayor and city council like their property taken?
— **Theresa Morley Swart**

Morrow County's growing economy

Go Morrow County! It sounds like if a person really wanted to work, they shouldn't have any trouble finding a decent paying job.
— **Tom Arbuckle**

\$8 billion transportation plan debated for Oregon

Ridiculous that Eastern Oregon would have to have a payroll tax increase for mass transit when we don't have any.
— **Stacey Erz Stank**

They will use the money for something else then raise the gas tax at a later date and use the same lame excuses.
— **Allen Norman**

PERS is not the demon. The \$2,500 a month my guys who are retiring after 30-plus years of service to the State of Oregon are not the ones who are breaking the state.
— **Paul McDonough**

Hermiston couple finally makes prom, 64 years later

These two made me tear up when they came through the photo booth. Such a beautiful couple and an even more beautiful story!
— **Stacie Shular**

One of the great lessons of the Twitter age is that much can be summed up in just a few words. Here are some of this week's takes. Tweet yours @Tim_Trainor or email editor@eastoregonian.com, and keep them to 140 characters.

