

The hard, satisfying life of writers

Imagine this: You have just earned a degree in computer engineering. You're good at it, and you have spent a summer as an intern earning more money than you could have imagined in your hard-scrabble rural childhood.

But you decide to take a victory lap — a fifth year of college — and when on a whim you enroll in a course on writing poetry, you discover that it's what you are doing in that class that matters to you. Matters deeply.

We heard this story at last month's First Draft Writers' Series. Joe Wilkins' third book of poems had recently won the 2017 Oregon Book Award, and people who have read it can't recommend his memoir "The Mountain and the Fathers: Growing Up in the Big Dry" highly enough. Two more novels are coming soon, and he's just earned a major teaching award at Linfield. That writing course has worked out pretty well for him.

I found myself smiling as I listened to Joe's story. No matter what we do for a living — "Don't quit your day job," we tell each other — all writers share that feeling. This is what matters.

It's why I drive to Portland every month

to meet with a poetry workshop group. We call ourselves the Side Porch Poets — a group of eight women who have been gathering from various corners of the state for more than a decade to share and respond to each other's words.

We are a diverse group — some have never published, some are well-known, even famous. What we have in common, beyond the deep friendship that has grown out of these meetings, is a passion for language, for discovery, for meaning. For working hard to make something that matters.

Granted, it's rare that the rest of us can help our most famous member with her poems, but when we can, Ursula Le Guin is the happiest person in the room. Or maybe the second happiest.

Meeting with these women feeds me, keeps me breathing. I can't believe how lucky I am to have them. I get to meet with writing friends in Pendleton sometimes, too. If you see a huddle of folks around a table poring over identical white pages at Great Pacific or Sisters or Buckin Bean, that might be us.

Writing isn't the only form of human creativity that matters. Artists alter our perception of the world with music, dance,

paint and canvas, wood and glass and fabric, with their relationship to animals, to plants, even machines. But words are the medium we all share. You might even say words make the world — for better or for worse. And when language is debased by those in power, bad things happen.

"Hard times are coming," Ursula Le Guin said as she accepted her lifetime achievement award at the 2014 National Book Awards ceremony, "when we'll be wanting the voices of writers who can see alternatives to how we live now, can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need writers who can remember freedom — poets, visionaries — realists of a larger reality."

I'm grateful that in our town we can gather every month to hear recognized Northwest writers who work at "getting the words right." It's important. But it's fun, too.

At 7 p.m. on July 20 at Pendleton Center for the Arts, First Draft will be hosting a native son. Joel Wayne (PHS, Class of 2001) will read from his work and answer questions about his writing life — which began, he says, when his sixth grade teacher Mrs. Bell sent him to the Oregon Writing Festival.

Students stayed in a hotel in downtown Portland for a night — "a big deal for a lower-middle class kid from a tiny town in Eastern Oregon." Writing is really hard, the featured speaker told them. If they had other interests, they should do those things instead. A few years later, when he was asked to

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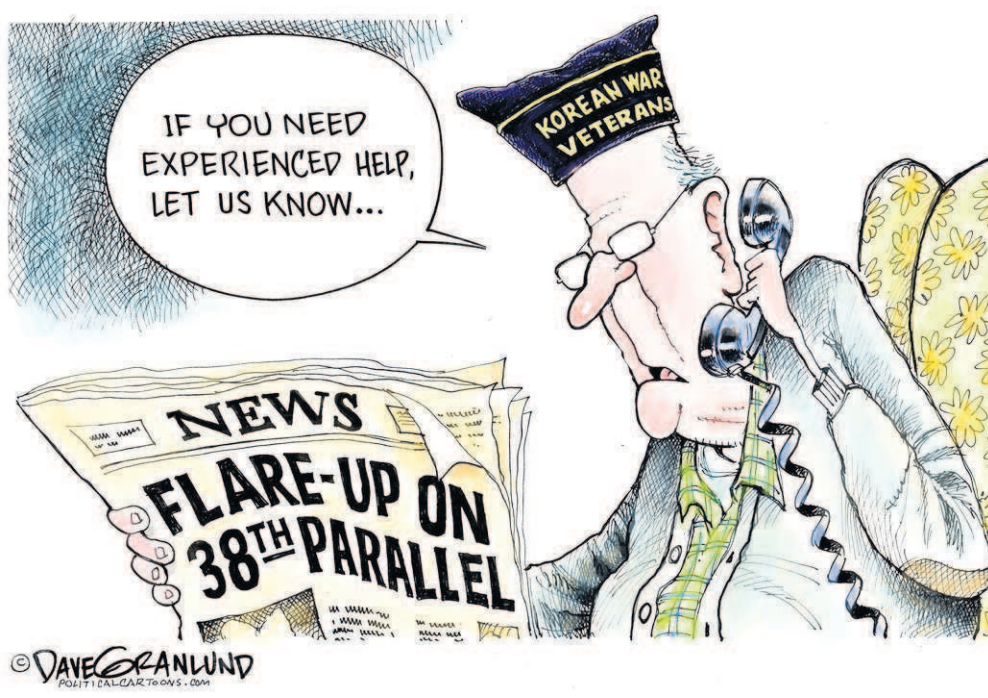
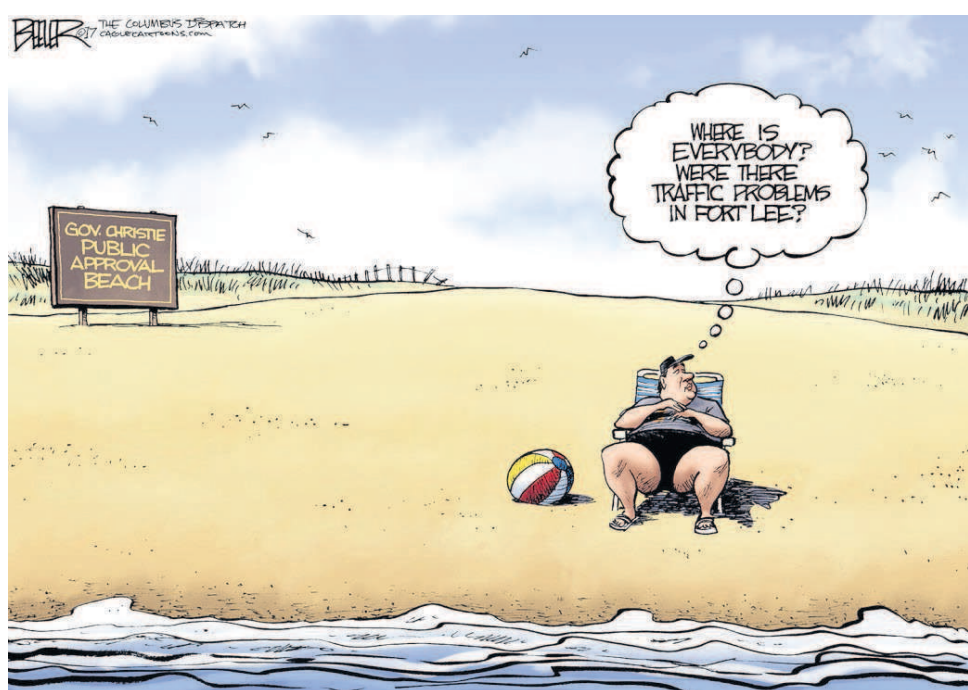


BETTE HUSTED FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

address the Scholastic Writing Awards, he would give different advice to the younger versions of himself he knew were out there in the audience.

"You're doing just fine, kiddo," he told them. "Now keep at it."

Bette Husted is a writer and a student of T'ai Chi and the natural world. She lives in Pendleton.



Land losses and lessons on the Great Plains

Gabe Brown's 5,200-acre farm and ranch in central North Dakota practically straddles the 100th meridian, the line that historically divided Eastern lands that were farmed from the drier Western lands that were grazed by livestock.

That geographic boundary, of course, has always been somewhat blurry. But in recent years, row-crop agriculture on an industrial scale has pushed the dry line westward. Modern sod-busting has gobbled up vast expanses of native grasslands, markedly enlarging the nation's corn and soybean acres.

Critics watched this happen but weren't able to quantify the ecological alteration. Now, an analysis issued by the World Wildlife Fund, Plowprint Report, confirms just how extensively the American Great Plains has been transformed. The Great Plains region, the short and mixed-grass portion of the North American prairie, includes lands from the Canadian border east of the Rocky Mountains, between Great Falls, Montana, and Fargo, North Dakota, and stretching south to Texas — some 800 million acres in total.

Destruction of the Eastern portion of the continent's prairie region — the tallgrass part — was caused by conversion to corn and soybean fields and is nearly complete. Less than 1 percent of the original tallgrass prairie ecosystem survives. The Plowprint study reveals that since 2009, more than 53 million acres of prairie on the Great Plains has been plowed and converted to corn, soybeans and wheat. That figure — an area that equals the size of Kansas — represents about 13 percent of the estimated 419 million acres of Great Plains grasslands that had survived in its native condition.

Fortunately, stewardship models show



PETER CARRELS
Comment

how farming can be less damaging and more sustainable. For example, Gabe Brown changed the way he managed his land after suffering four years — 1995 to 1998 — of hail and drought. Nearly broke and lacking access to capital to buy seeds and chemicals, Brown re-examined his approach to farming. Finding that his soils had dramatically deteriorated through conventional farming practices, he started avoiding tillage and now relies on cover crops, perennial grasses and a diversity of income streams.

When many of his neighbors plowed pastures to plant corn, Brown did the opposite, reducing row crops from 2,000 acres to 800 acres and re-vegetating 1,200 acres back into prairie. His operation also emphasized grazing and grasses instead of growing annual grains.

"It's not easy to admit that I farmed the wrong way for many years," Brown said. "But we've completely weaned ourselves from government programs, stopped using synthetic fertilizers, minimized herbicide use, and in the process enriched and even built our soils."

Keeping roots in the ground became his mantra, and that meant growing cover crops and indigenous grasses. He began measuring moisture retention and monitored microbes in the dirt. Soon he had a name for his soil stewardship: Re-regenerative agriculture.

On land still planted to row crops, Brown saw his yields rise, outpacing his county's averages by 20 percent. He began selling grass-finished livestock and nutrient-dense eggs, honey and other produce directly to consumers. He grazed cattle, sheep and hogs on dozens of carefully rotated pastures. The operation included 1,000 pastured laying hens.

"We can feed the world better food by maintaining healthy soils," declared Brown. "The destruction of perennial grasses to grow subsidized crops like corn and soybeans is a travesty."

The World Wildlife Fund would likely agree, noting that grassland songbirds have experienced the sharpest population declines of all North American birds. In addition, plowing on the Great Plains has released billions of metric tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, and the loss of prairie habitat now threatens North American bumblebee species.

Gabe Brown and his profitable, regenerative farming methods have helped propel a new movement of soil stewards and prairie advocates. In recent years his popularity as a speaker and presenter has him regularly touring the region, the nation and other countries.

In 1998, the same year Gabe Brown began to transform his farming techniques, a dozen South Dakota farmers and ranchers concerned about prairie destruction formed the South Dakota Grasslands Coalition. Brown helped the coalition get underway, and since then it has flourished, with a current membership of around 500. These days, some people call him the "guru" of smarter agriculture.

Brown is a modest guy, but he's glad to say that regenerative techniques are catching on. "We're seeing a snowballing effect," he said. That's good news for anyone who cares about the Great Plains, because Brown and other farmer-ranchers in the region hold the key to its protection: About 90 percent of the Great Plains is privately owned.

Pete Carrels is a contributor to Writers on the Range, the opinion service of High Country News. He writes in Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

Quick takes

Rainbow Family compared to disaster area, occupation

I suppose the Rainbow Gathering is akin to a refugee camp. Interesting parallel; thank you for sharing.

— Grant Cooper

The Bundys were trying to take possession of the refuge. The Rainbow folks are camping on public land for a little while. And you know, law enforcement actually has been arresting and citing folks at the Rainbow thing.

— Brenden Nemo

These people don't care about the environment. They're violating federal laws and are walking free. Anyone else would be in jail or prison.

— Levi Raber

Some Eastern Oregon nursing homes in danger

Political choice: Cut funding and force people to accept a lower level of care. People are dying because of state policy and the ACA when it comes to senior care.

— Loren Lovejoy

Nursing homes don't have enough staff or nurse assistants to care for the clients. It is like that in every single nursing home in western and Eastern Oregon. That's why we are keeping our parents at home as long as possible.

— Armstrong Dan-jeannette

Hermiston Foods to close

Hermiston Foods will be missed. It provided many jobs in our area and employed many kids looking for summer work over the years.

— Debbie Trumbull Pedro

I worked there as a teen, sad to see it go.

— Bryan Bow

Pendleton, Hermiston consider food truck rules

Hermiston was limited to three trucks because of racism. Taco trucks have better food than any fast food chain.

— Kyle Brangham

\$500 a year is an outrageous annual expense for a new business to simply exist on private land.

— Steven Pelles

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.

Rep. Parrish wrong to pursue overturn of healthcare provider tax

The (Medford) Mail Tribune

Rep. Julie Parrish had a good idea in April, when she proposed shifting state employees' health care into coordinated care organizations, potentially saving the state up to \$1 billion. Now, she's pushing a bad idea: filing a referendum to overturn a tax on hospitals and insurance plans that will maintain Medicaid coverage for 350,000 Oregonians and help balance the state budget.

The provider tax, approved by majority Democrats with only four Republican votes, would increase the existing tax on hospitals and add a tax on some insurance premiums, raising \$670 million. The tax was supported by the hospital industry, and it will leverage \$1.9 billion in federal funding that the state otherwise would not get.

Parrish, along with other Republican lawmakers, objects to the provider tax, arguing that the costs will be passed on to customers, although the hospitals stand to get their increased tax payments back in the form of payments for treating Oregon Health Plan patients.

The wisdom of a Band-Aid tax plan to keep the Medicaid program afloat can be debated, and it would have been preferable to see lawmakers enact serious cost-containment measures and restructure the corporate tax structure to balance the budget as they initially intended. Parrish's proposed changes to state employee health coverage could have played a prominent role in that effort, and it's unfortunate that the majority Democrats paid it scant attention.

But launching a petition drive to overturn the provider tax, potentially throwing the

health coverage of hundreds of thousands of Oregonians into limbo for a year, is irresponsible. If Parrish gathered enough signatures to qualify the referendum for the ballot, the provider tax would be put on hold until the November 2018 election.

Yes, Oregon law provides for citizen initiative and referendum powers, allowing the voters to overturn legislation they disagree with and to enact measures the Legislature can't or won't pass.

But Parrish's campaign isn't a spontaneous uprising of popular will; it's retaliation by a lawmaker and a political action committee for legislation that didn't go her way.

Oregon at least can try to provide some stability for as long as possible. Retaliatory measures such as Parrish's referendum are not helpful.