

# Believing in the American story

Ellen Knutson asked us: “What does it mean to be an American?”

We had gathered at Tamastlikt Cultural Institute, which was hosting her Oregon Humanities Conversation Project, to explore this question. Most of us had just seen Tamastlikt’s newly opened exhibit “The Art of Survival: Enduring the Turmoil of Tule Lake” and our heads were full of the images and recorded voices of American citizens held in the most notorious of the World War II internment camps, so it wouldn’t be an easy question to answer.

But at a time when Americans are so often described as “polarized,” it seemed important to try. Americans have differences of race, ethnicity, place, religion, wealth, language, education, and ideology. Knutson had pointed out. So what are the things that unite us as a nation? What is it that we value?

As I listened to the conversation — which kept going in the hallway, in the parking lot, and is ongoing in my mind — I thought, this is why stories are so important. Who are we? What stories do we tell about ourselves? Are our stories large enough to include all of us?

Perhaps the only way to make sure is to listen, and keep listening, to the stories of

our neighbors. That’s why we work so hard to bring Northwest writers to the First Draft Writers’ Series at Pendleton Center for the Arts, and encourage anyone who signs up to read at the open mic.

From Shaindel Beers we heard what it is like to receive online death threats because

you are Jewish. Xavier Cavazos let us imagine ourselves as performance poets rehearsing on the streets of New York City, where no one paid any attention, then in an abandoned warehouse outside Ellensburg, where police approached with handcuffs. How does it feel to be a Native poet reading the want ads when the vehicles are named for the indigenous peoples

of America? Tiffany Midge’s satire let us laugh but made us think, too. Imagine searching the want ads for a peppy Scot, or a low-mileage Belgian.

Can we envision growing up at Hanford, sitting on our father’s shoulders to cheer President Kennedy’s visit, growing up to work at Hanford, then watching our childhood best friend’s father die of radiation-induced illness? “One box contains my childhood,” Kathleen Flenniken wrote; “the other contains his death / if one is true / how can the other be true?”

After Gary Lark shared his poem “Road

Warriors” — about passing a convoy of soldiers on their way to camp when “Northbound on I-5, / the Iraq death count / for my old unit / drops from the radio” — he told us that because Oregon Senator Wayne Morse had prevented his National Guard unit from deploying to Vietnam he was standing here, able to read to us. We all felt the shiver that went through the room.

Americans come in all ages, all genders, all ethnicities. Native American writers have read at First Draft, and Chinese and Japanese-American, student-American (performance poetry aided by cell phones; how do they do that?), gay-American, straight-American. One National Book Award for Lifetime Achievement-American. From all of them we’ve learned a bit more about who we are.

One of my favorite nights was when First Draft hosted Oregon Poet Laureate Lawson Inada, who was four when he left behind his blue tricycle and his dog and went to the Jerome and then Amache internment camps. “We’ve lived with the experience since,” he writes in Legends from Camp. (“I work on campus. / I try to concentrate. / Still, things sneak up / to remind me: / ‘This is not Amache!’”)

“Tell your own stories!” he urged everyone in the room. “It’s important.”

I thought of him as I walked back to my car, and of the person in our discussion group whose family had been sent to the Tule Lake Camp. Of Captain Jack, who held out in the nearby Stronghold for such a long

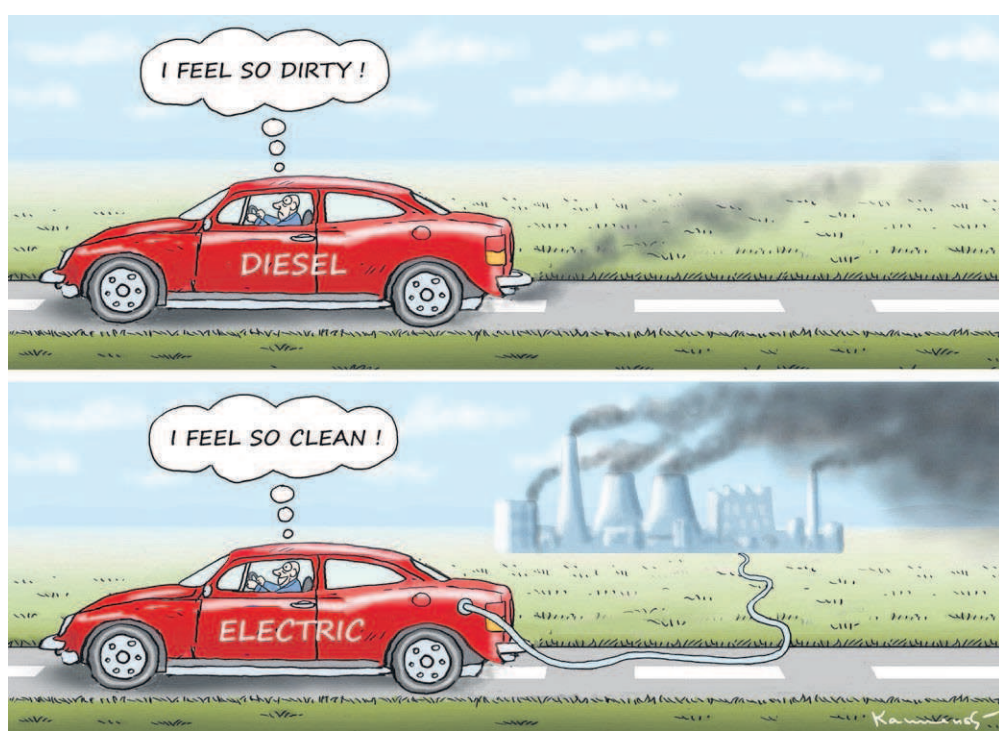
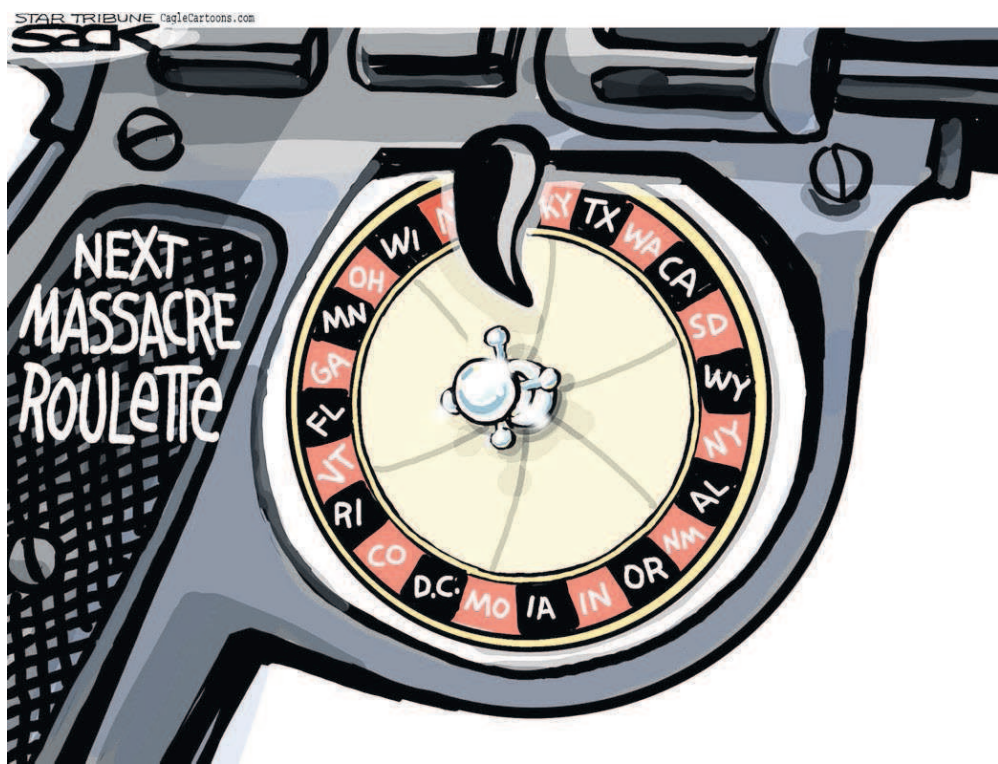
What are the things that unite us as a nation? What is it we value?



## BETTE HUSTED FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

time. And of the challenges that face us now, as Americans. Which stories do we believe? The next First Draft is Thursday, Nov. 16 at 7 p.m. It’s free. I hope you’ll come.

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



## Quick takes

### Hunter kills wolf in Starkey area, questions arise

Only in Oregon, would the government let a species that was eradicated for a good reason be allowed to flourish again.

— John D. Barnedd Sr.

Question everything. That’s how you find the truth.

— Jim Brawski

Will run within 6-8 feet before turning? Close enough (to shoot)!

— Pat Keely

We used to have fish stories, now we have wolf stories. Geesh.

— Laurie Thompson

### 700-plus Oregonians choose third gender on ID cards

I wish someone would get a group of people together to come up with a new pronoun. Using a pronoun that already exists and means more than one person — they — is confusing and adds to the resistance of mainstream America adapting to it.

— Kim Gibson

When my son was in junior high they had a question male/female. He answered none. Guess he got confused. He thought they wanted to know if he had sex.

— Becky Flory

### Old Rodeo City Inn remains derelict, dangerous

They need to go ahead and knock the building down before something bad happens. As it stands now it’s a haven for drug users, homeless people and criminals. It needs to go.

— Nicholas Lee

Clean the Edwards Building up, too. It’s an eyesore.

— Emily Sparhawk

### OSP donates a robot to Umatilla robotics

My son is on the robotics team and came home so proud they were tasked with taking care of it. The Umatilla High Robotics is a very proud group of kids and they are very deserving of this.

— Michell Lowrance

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.

## There’s wild game, then there’s game behind a fence

Earlier this month I was fortunate enough to kill a nice blacktail buck. I had been hunting off and on through deer season, and I saw lots of does every time I went out. With a little patience I knew I would finally cross paths with a good buck and have a chance to punch my tag. I was feeling good about my chances after the weather in Oregon’s Coast Range turned wet and cold in October, so I headed out to public land near the town of Cave Junction.

By noon, the buck was dressed, skinned and hung out to cool and dry in my wood shed. My wife, Suzanne, needed to make a trip into Grants Pass so I took over the supervising of our young daughters. Worn out from the morning’s work, I decided that a little TV time was in order, and within minutes a commercial ran for Arby’s new “venison sandwich.”

My 5-year-old asked, “Daddy, what’s venison?” I explained that venison is deer or elk meat. “Oh,” she said, “just like our deer?” Well, no, not exactly, I replied. In fact, it’s not even close.

An entire industry based on raising and harvesting traditional game meats has evolved over the past several decades. There are thousands of game farms in the country, and hundreds of them in the West. Arizona, California, Colorado, Oregon, Washington, Idaho, Montana, Utah, Texas and Wyoming — all provide venison to restaurants and grocery stores. But rather than roaming wild, these animals are raised behind tall fences as if they were domestic cattle or sheep, and they are butchered, packaged and sold in much the same manner.

We know that these game farms help spread the disease known as chronic wasting disease, or CWD, to herds of wild game. This deadly disease spreads most

easily through captive populations, but it also makes its way into the wild, spreading both through contact, when wild animals touch game animals “through the fence,” and through domestic animals that escape. The problem has been clear for a while, and many groups are working to find ways to stop the spread of the disease.

Technically, a deer or elk in the wild is the same as an animal

raised in a pen. But the actual differences are immense. Imagine a wild turkey that scratches out a living in the forest, surviving on bugs and berries. It has no white meat to speak of; its meat is dark from the vascularization of well-developed muscles. Compare that to the Thanksgiving birds we buy from the supermarket — monstrosities that are raised to boost their fat and juiciness content. Factory-farmed turkeys sport giant white breasts with pathetic wings that have never moved. Fenced elk also differ from their farm-raised kin. You can tell by their antlers: They are white in game-farm animals because they are never used, but in the wild they’re black, because the elk sharpen them on trees, the better to fight other elk.

Wild game is unique, and the experience of hunting an animal and bringing it home for meat makes it something that transcends “meal prep.” Call me a snob, but I have to take a deep breath every time I hear someone say, “Oh, you hunt, I just love elk. I had it at a restaurant in Montana.” I guarantee that the elk that diner tasted, while probably delicious, was an inherently

different beast from the animal my wife and I packed out of Nevada’s Jarbidge Wilderness last year.

What Arby’s is selling is a fantasy of wild animals running free until they are hunted down and turned into dinner. Arby’s is also selling the idea that its sandwiches connect ordinary people to someone like the charismatic hunter Steven Rinella, who has his own television show, without requiring any of the hard work it takes to

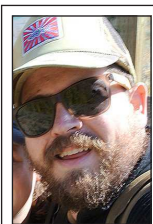
kill, butcher and process a large animal. Arby’s might put a piece of meat between two pieces of bread and call it venison, but I don’t think that piece of meat deserves the name.

At least Arby’s venison is said to come from domestic red stag in New Zealand, so the company is not supporting an industry that spreads disease to wild deer and elk

here in America. But it is normalizing the consumption of game meat in a national ad campaign without acknowledging any of the potential dangers involved in the game farming industry. Before they saw Arby’s TV ads, how many people even knew that they could buy venison?

It will be interesting to check whether the sales of game meat from online vendors flourish as a result of this ad campaign. Why knows: Maybe McDonald’s will get on board and offer us a special “Big Moose.”

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BRIAN SEXTON  
Comment

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