

Modernity offers but a few benefits

Readers of this column have perhaps noticed that I tend to wax nostalgic and frequently laud the praises of “the good ole days.” I will admit that I find new cars to be ugly in their homogeneity and loaded with annoyances like automatic door locks and automatic transmissions (I don’t need someone telling me when to shift gears). Worst of all, the newer a vehicle is, the less the likelihood that I can work on it.

I find most new music to be an utter waste of time and decibels, especially new country music. I relish every opportunity to hear Eddy Arnold’s “Cattle Call” or Marty Robbins’ “El Paso.”

I don’t like new houses because they generally lack my favorite features of true “character,” such as paint peeling from wood siding, drafty windows, creaky floors and inadequate foundations. What I like best about old houses is that they tend to be smaller in size, steeper in roof pitch, and were usually constructed sans building permits. I am not a fan of government interference.

I hate plastic packaging and am reasonably sure that if there is a hell, whoever invented the “blister pack” has already had his or her ticket punched for permanent residence on the banks of the river Styx.

Even though I have followed the expansion Seattle Mariners for 40 years, I am of the opinion that real baseball had eight teams in each league, no designated hitter and was without the frivolity of things like batting helmets, artificial turf and guaranteed multi-year, multi-million dollar contracts.

I have never personally bought anything from the company that shares its name with South America’s great river. I will gladly pay a little more at a mom and pop joint owned by a neighbor and friend.

One modern event does, however, attract my attention every Memorial Day weekend and has my unwavering support and enthusiasm — the Helix Rodeo.

In the year 2000, a group of locals were looking for an event to serve as a fundraiser

for the Helix Chamber of Commerce, and more specifically, its scholarship fund. A conversation at the Helix Tavern led to formation of a committee that, through its collective creativity, ingenuity and hard work managed to organize and stage a very successful rodeo on the northern edge of Helix in a rented-for-the-day wheat field.

Bleachers and a “beer garden” tent were borrowed, quality stock was procured, volunteers were in abundance and several hundred spectators braved a thunderstorm to

witness history being made and a tradition being born.

After a one-year hiatus due to lease negotiation difficulties, a permanent arena was built on land donated by a local business magnate in 2002 and a truly unique community event has thrived ever since.

The Heart of the Country Rodeo, as it is officially called, is small-town rural America at its unselfish and cooperative best. Save for the necessary professionals such as stock contractors, pick-up men and an announcer, everyone else is a volunteer — from timers to stripping chute help to ticket-takers and bartenders in the front row seat beer garden.

Events range from bull riding, calf roping and bronc riding to mutton-bustin’, 12-years-old-and-under barrel racing and a stick-horse race for kids 6 and under.

Being that it is held on Memorial Day weekend, an appropriate salute to fallen soldiers and recently deceased community members is a staple, along with a prayer from our town’s preacher and a moving rendition of the national anthem by a talented Griswold High student that is sure to bring a tear to the eye of even grizzled old cowboys.

A local Helix grad creates a new poster every year and copies of the original poster from 2000 (created by an artist/art teacher) are auctioned off for hundreds of dollars. The souvenir programs are created and printed by the kids at Griswold High School.

All of the proceeds of the event are used to fund scholarships for graduating seniors

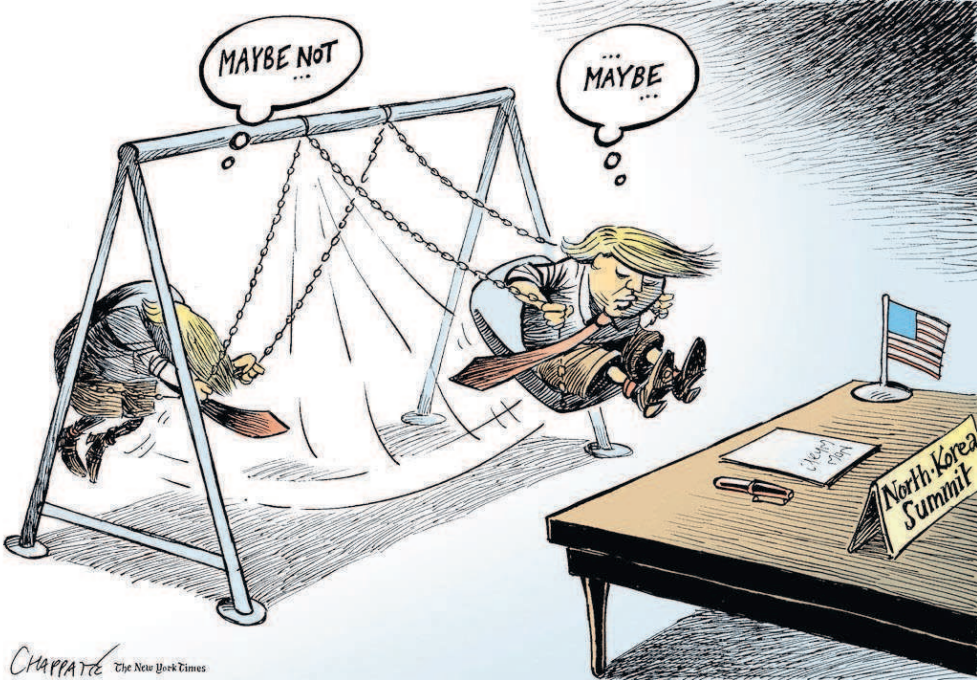
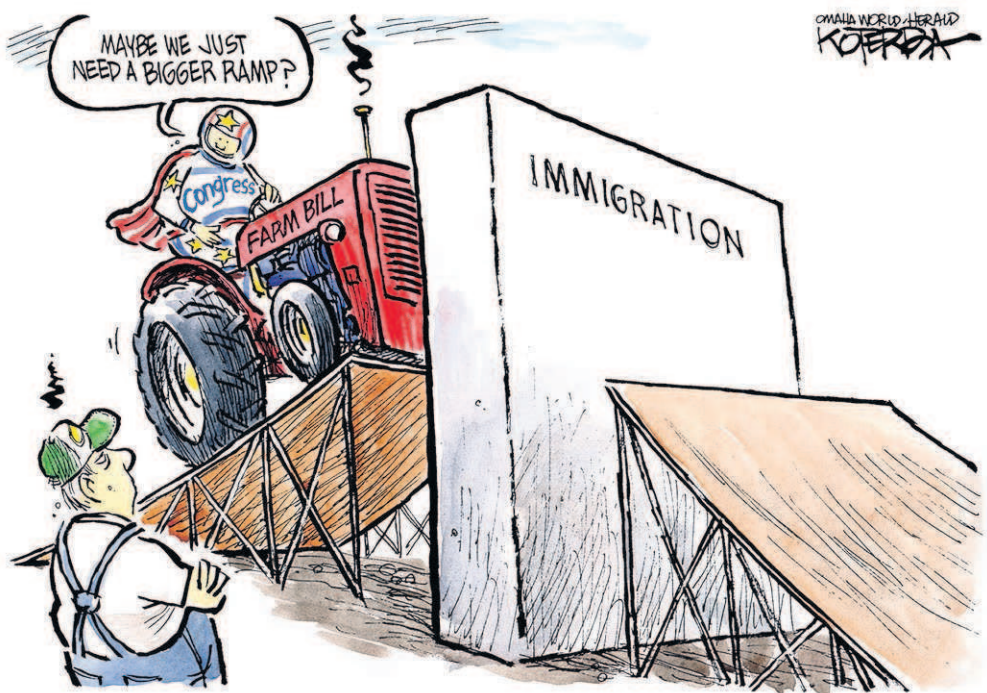


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FROM THE TRACTOR

of our fine school and, to date, well over \$60,000 has been awarded — not too bad for a town of 160 residents.

Certain vestiges of modernity hold no appeal to me and never shall — but every year I look forward to seeing my friends, family, and neighbors at the Helix Rodeo.

Matt Wood is his son’s hired man and his daughter’s biggest fan. He lives on a farm near Helix, where he collects antiques and friends.



Student snowflakes? Try badasses

We live in an era of profound ecological disruption, with reports on climate change, habitat destruction, depleted oceans and mass extinction piling up by the day. Yet an important part of the climate story is commonly overlooked: the emotional toll of ongoing environmental loss.

I’ve watched students at the University of Washington struggle with the depressing realities of our ecological crisis for nearly 10 years. That’s why I decided to offer a new seminar on “Environmental Grief and Climate Anxiety.” When registration opened, every seat filled. But after the local media began reporting on the class, a flood of derisive emails and phone calls poured into my office, and the newspaper comment sections filled up with responses mocking today’s “absurd” college courses and the students who attend them.

Here’s just one reaction: “Do the students roll out nap mats and curl up in the fetal position with their blankies and pacifiers while listening to her lectures?”

Given our polarized political climate and the way it’s infected environmental issues, perhaps the hostility directed at me wasn’t that surprising. But I was amazed at the derision heaped on today’s students. They were mocked as “wimpy” and “coddled” babies, told to “grow up,” and caricatured over and over as “snowflakes.”

The irony of such charges runs deep. Facing the hard truths of our climate crisis takes steady courage and a certain amount of grit. Today’s students are reaching maturity at a moment when the scale of environmental



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disruption boggles the mind: increasing wildfires, rising seas and collapsing glaciers, vanishing forests and displaced communities. And remember that much worse is on the way.

Denial — carefully looking the other way — is a normal response to challenges

this overwhelming. But unlike many of us, the young people I’ve met who are preparing for environmental careers are choosing not to look away. They know that the work ahead will require them to confront even more suffering and loss, and they are right to seek ways to channel their distress into action. Emerging efforts by colleges and community groups to provide tools for managing that distress can hardly be dismissed as the equivalent of a group hug.

My class is more like boot camp, preparing students for the long, hard fight ahead.

Granted, a college course on ecological grief is bound to strike some as odd. When we think about climate change, we usually picture its effects on the physical landscape. But research shows that climate disruption is also having a profound emotional impact. For some, the daily news alone is enough to cause sadness and anxiety. For more and more people, environmental ills are experienced as a part of daily life, whether they work outdoors in record heat, experience frequent droughts and floods, or spend summers choking on the wildfire smoke that increasingly blankets the Western states.

To make things worse, the impacts of climate change are coming down hardest on the most vulnerable populations — people who may already suffer from inadequate access to affordable food, shelter, health care and safe

drinking water. Indigenous communities with cultural roots in the natural world have a particularly high risk of experiencing trauma from environmental loss in their homelands. Some of my students come from these backgrounds.

Many of us are familiar with the stages of mourning following the loss of human life — denial, guilt, anger, depression and, ultimately, acceptance — but we don’t really have a vocabulary for the loss of our natural world. Only recently have climate activists and mental health professionals started using terms like climate depression, eco-grief and pre-traumatic stress. This is the distress that can occur when your daily work is to talk about and plan for an increasingly ominous future.

Left out of all the snide and hostile remarks directed at me and my students was the image featured in the *Seattle Times* story on this class. It showed a dead albatross, its open belly overflowing with plastic trash. The photo was from a series by photographer Chris Jordan, who spent years documenting the mass die-off of these magnificent birds. Some he held in his hands as they gasped their final breath after ingesting Pacific Ocean plastic. Jordan’s work exposing the consequences of our consumer culture required him to look suffering and death in the face. It’s not work for the faint of heart, and Jordan has spoken publicly about the emotional toll of his work.

Direct engagement with today’s biggest challenges is, nevertheless, the path many of today’s students are choosing to follow. That doesn’t make them snowflakes. It makes them badasses.

Jennifer Atkinson is a contributor to Writers on the Range, the opinion service of High Country News.

A Peace Corps House in D.C.

When you get to be 80 years old, you find that old pithy sayings and aphorisms can help you get through the day. For example: “It’s the small things that count.” Or, “Once a Peace Corps volunteer, always a Peace Corps volunteer.”

In the past five decades, a total of 275,000 Peace Corps volunteers have served in 140 countries worldwide. There are many living hereabouts, I run into them all the time: “When and where did you serve?”

About a decade ago, I remembered a small old paperback on a bookshelf. Flipping through “Twenty Years at Hull House” by Jane Addams, published in 1910, I found this summary that I had highlighted:

“A Settlement House, then, is an experiment to aid the solution of the social and industrial problems engendered by the modern conditions of life in a great city. It is an attempt to relieve the over-accumulation of wealth at one end of society and destitution at the other end; it assumes that this over-accumulation and destitution is most sorely felt in the things that pertain to social and educational privileges. It must, in a sense, give the warm welcome of an inn. The one thing to be dreaded in the Settlement is that it loses its flexibility, its power of quick adaptation. It must be open to conviction and must have an abiding sense of tolerance.”

One result of Jane Addams’ pursuit of tolerance and proper social and educational advantages was the 1931 Nobel Peace Prize. And now there are about 500 settlement houses in America and more than 5,000 internationally, including one in Nigeria where I served, 1962-1964.

The aim of a settlement or neighborhood house is to bring about a new kind of community life. It is in the community or neighborhood that people seek and fight for solutions to their concrete, daily, local and immediate problems. In this way, settlements also offer opportunities for community service: holding forums on local concerns, registering voters and providing information about citywide issues. And that is the stuff that motivates successful Peace Corps volunteers.



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The idea for a Peace Corps settlement house began during a 2015 discussion with leadership about the possibility of moving Peace Corps headquarters out of downtown Washington, D.C., into an appropriate “careworn neglected” neighborhood so that it could “walk its talk.” Working with four local returned

Peace Corps volunteers, we began development of a detailed proposal. I had been pushing this for years.

It should be noted that as long as Peace Corps House successfully meets its goals of helping to provide needed social services and social justice to the neighborhood, Peace Corps will not be involved in any way. Returned Peace Corps volunteers will work there but it will be professionally managed. It will share space with the National Parks Conservation Association, thus becoming the Peace Corps Community Center.

Now that Peace Corps House has been enthusiastically accepted by the Baker Community Association, in its startup it will likely concentrate on programs that empower young people. Eventually, these could include an outdoor school, a mentoring program, or one that teaches older kids useful adult skills and/or creative writing, computer skills, music, arts education and other programs that find community support and returned Peace Corps volunteers to help. These examples illustrate the breadth of possibilities. There will also be a shower and toilets for homeless people.

Yes, I have managed the development of Peace Corps House from Pendleton. And it worked. While I am increasingly reclusive and haven’t been on an airplane since 2006, remaining in Pendleton was a successful strategy. A little bit of Hebert goes a long way.

Peace Corps House will be part of any legacy I leave behind. But given the number of initiatives I’ve failed at here in Pendleton and on the Umatilla Reservation, I’m very proud of Peace Corps House. I think that Jane Addams would also be proud.

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