

What makes a character

In the past month I unfortunately had to attend memorial services for two neighbors (and friends) who each passed away at the all too young age of 65.

One was a Umatilla County native who, following his father's lead, plied his trade as a dryland wheat farmer for more than 40 years. I had the privilege of being one of his neighbors, and admirers, for 25 of those years. He was truly the nonpareil in his field (pun intended). His fields were always clean, his yields at or near the top of the spectrum for his area, his roadsides were kept weed-free, his equipment was impeccably maintained and the farmstead was postcard-worthy.

On numerous occasions I sought his advice on farming issues and his opinions were always offered willingly, whether solicited or not. I attempted renting tools from him but instead borrowed them because he refused to accept payment.

In addition to being a successful agrarian, he was also one of the most well-read and erudite persons I have ever personally encountered, as evidenced by an encounter my family and I had with him many years ago when we were out for a summer evening walk. He asked if we were out for a constitutional or a perambulation, to which I responded "both" — we were exercising and simultaneously assessing the yield potential of our wheat crop nearing harvest. The level of respect I had for this

particular neighbor bordered on fear.

My other recently deceased neighbor was originally from the East Coast. He was raised in and around Buffalo, New York, and had traveled extensively while in the Air Force (he was stationed in Japan for a time) and as a long-haul trucker. While not a farmer, he did possess a penchant for gardening. His father died when he was barely in high school and it left him with an indefatigable sense of self-reliance based upon his dad's prophetic warning that someday he would be gone and the son would need to rely on his own wit and ingenuity.

I first met my favorite native New Yorker when I bought a dilapidated house next door to him and embarked on a fix-up project. He was always curious and encouraging and even helped me roof the place only weeks after he had a heart attack.

While these two friends of mine were ostensibly from different worlds, they did share certain similarities. Both had the good sense to "marry up," as the saying goes. And for both, toward the end of their earthly reigns, their wives were incredibly dedicated. Both men were also mechanically inclined — a trait I admire above almost all else.

Another trait they shared was the well-earned title of "character." While this term could certainly describe their moral fiber and deep sense of decency, in this case

I feel fortunate to have known Dave and Ken for as long as I did — though I certainly wish it could have been many more years for both.

I'm referring more to unique qualities, or perhaps even idiosyncrasies, which set them apart as truly memorable and in the case of the first-mentioned farmer neighbor, even iconic figures. In a recent conversation with another good friend, he brought up the subject of exactly what defines a "character." He suggested that often a good deal of life experience, especially adversity ("learning the hard way") or longevity, or unabashed expertise in a certain profession or job, can lead to one becoming seemingly obstinate or cantankerous but well-respected at the same time.

Son Willie has noted that many of our acquaintances who are particularly skilled at their professions are, to most folks' way of thinking, "grumpy" — whether intentionally or not. I lament that some folks fail to look beyond the gruff exterior of such "characters" and realize that they may have a tremendous amount of knowledge or wisdom that is not always fully appreciated or given the respect that it deserves. "Grumpy" folks have sometimes just simply grown tired of being surrounded by a perceived abundance of apathy and/or incompetence and have likely "lost their good humor over the deal" (this was an expression I heard more than once from my departed farmer neighbor). In a word, they care. In my preferred profane vernacular they give a sh--. Too many people do not.

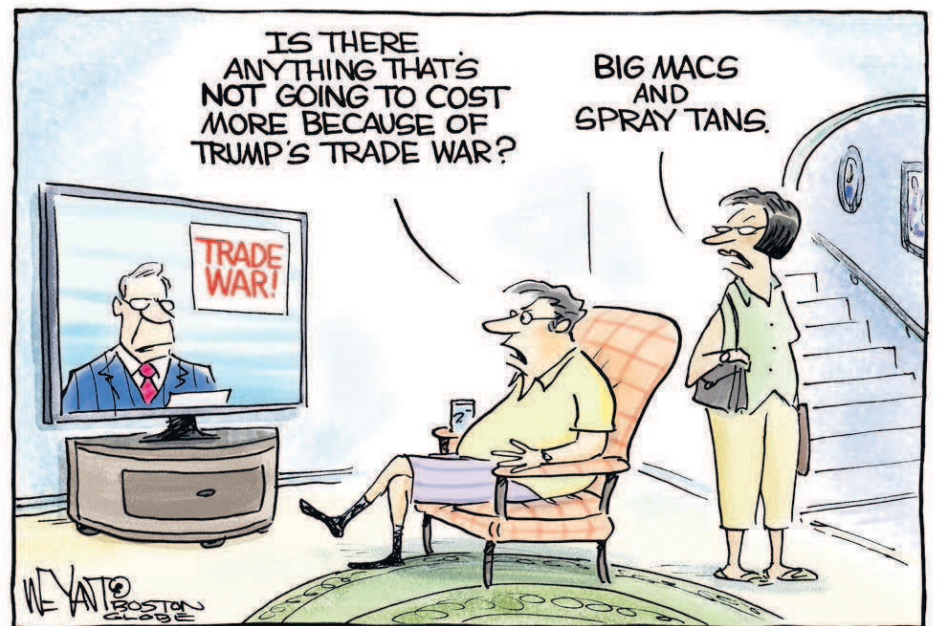
I feel fortunate to have known Dave and Ken for as long as I did — though I certainly wish it could have been many more years for both. I hope I can frequently emulate their generosity, and



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FROM THE TRACTOR

occasionally approach the lofty heights of near perfection they exhibited in their work. Most of all, I hope everyone who knew them will remember their contributions to their respective communities and appreciate what characters they both were.

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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.



Reducing wildfire risk in Elkhorn Mountains

Baker City Herald

The best time to reduce the risk of a big wildfire in Baker City's watershed was probably several decades ago.

Which is not to say it's too late. Despite the Forest Service's hands-off approach to the 10,000 acres in the Elkhorn Mountains through which the city's drinking water flows — not that a heavy-handed approach would be an improvement, to be sure — the watershed has avoided the fiery disaster that could leave the city without a safe water supply.

And a bill likely to exceed \$15 million or \$20 million to fix the problem.

Managing the watershed is a challenge. It is not a place where conventional commercial forestry, designed to maximize the production of board-foot of timber, makes sense. One reason the streams and springs continue to produce clear water is that the forests remain intact, able to absorb torrential rains and the spring runoff without turning into muddy torrents unfit for drinking or much else.

But those forests, as forests inevitably will, have aged and, in places, deteriorated, the victims of insects and disease and drought. A study in the 1990s by fire experts found that the area probably is overdue, statistically, for a big blaze.

We can't eliminate that risk, of course. But we can reduce it with well-conceived, and carefully executed, thinning of some of the densest, least healthy and most fire-prone parts of the watershed. And in one sense this might be the ideal time to pursue that strategy.

Congress this spring at long last ended the practice known as "fire borrowing." That refers to the Forest Service and other federal agencies diverting money earmarked for other work — including the sorts of thinning projects envisioned for the watershed — to pay the billion-dollar annual tabs to fight wildfires.

To put it another way, agencies have struggled to deal with the problems that contribute to massive blazes because they were trying to put out... massive blazes.

The bill that passed this year won't immediately fix the problem. But by 2020 the federal government will set aside \$2 billion annually, as an emergency fund, to fight the bigger fires. In theory that should make more money available for thinning projects.

Nor is that the only way Congress can help in this endeavor.

Oregon Sen. Ron Wyden and Rep. Greg Walden last week sent a letter to the Forest Service's regional office in Portland advocating for Baker City's watershed to be a priority for some of those dollars.

The threat facing the watershed is hardly of recent origin. In 1993 the Forest Service and city sponsored a tour of the watershed during which officials cited the same concerns that their successors talk about today.

We hope the combination of congressional support — and money — will yield more tangible results in the future than we've seen in the past.

Fred Rogers and the loveliness of the little good

Often people are moved to tears by sadness, but occasionally people are moved to tears by goodness. That's what's happens to the audiences of "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" the new documentary about Fred Rogers.

The documentary demonstrates how Rogers' children's show got started and how he used it over 30 years to teach and accompany children.



DAVID BROOKS
Comment

It describes the famous opening sequence — Mister Rogers going to the closet, putting on the sweater, changing his shoes. It describes how he gently gave children obvious and nonobvious advice: You are special just the way you are; no, children can't fall down the drains in the bathtub.

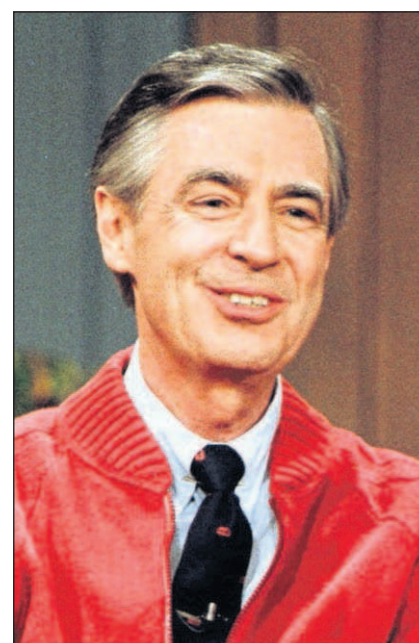
Sometimes he would slow down time, be silent for long periods as he fed his fish. Occasionally "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" touched politics. During the civil rights era, when black kids were being thrown out of swimming pools, Rogers and a black character bathed their feet together in a tub. After Bobby Kennedy was killed, Rogers gently explained what an assassination was.

There's nothing obviously moving here, and yet the audience is moved: sniffing, wiping the moisture from their cheeks. The power is in Rogers' radical kindness at a time when public kindness is scarce. It's as if the pressure of living in a time such as ours gets released in that theater as we're reminded that, oh yes, that's how people can be.

Moral elevation gains strength when it is scarce.

But there's also something more radical going on. Mister Rogers was a lifelong Republican and an ordained Presbyterian minister. His show was an expression of the mainline Protestantism that was once the dominating morality in American life.

Once, as Tom Junod described in a profile for Esquire, Rogers met a 14-year-old boy whose cerebral palsy left him sometimes unable to walk or talk. Rogers asked the boy to pray for him.



AP Photo/Gene J. Puskar

Fred Rogers rehearses the opening of his PBS show "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" during a June 28, 1989 taping in Pittsburgh.

The boy was thunderstruck. He had been the object of prayers many times, but nobody had asked him to pray for another. He said he would try since Mister Rogers must be close to God and if Mister Rogers liked him he must be OK.

Junod complimented Rogers on cleverly boosting the boy's self-esteem, but Rogers didn't look at the situation that way at all: "Oh, heavens no, Tom! I didn't ask him for his prayers for him; I asked for me. I asked him because I think that anyone who has gone through challenges like that must be very close to God. I asked him because I wanted his intercession."

And here is the radicalism that infused that show: that the child is closer to God than the adult; that the sick are closer than the healthy; that the poor are closer than the rich and the marginalized closer than the celebrated.

Rogers often comforted children on the show and taught them in simple terms, but the documentary shows how he did so with a profound respect for the dignity of each child that almost rises to veneration. You see his visceral disgust for shows that don't show respect — that dump slime on children, that try to entertain

them with manic violence. In the gospel of Fred Rogers, children are our superiors in the way they trust each person they meet, the way they lack guile, the way a child can admit simple vulnerability.

At one point in the series, the tiger puppet who stood in for Rogers' inner child sang, "Sometimes I wonder if I'm a mistake," meaning, I am so different, am I a mistake? An adult character sang along and tried to reassure him that he was not a mistake, but he was not reassured. As Alice Lloyd reminds us in *The Weekly Standard*, "deep and simple is far more essential than shallow and complex" was a favorite maxim of Rogers.

Children are superior for their instinctive small acts of neighborliness, the small hug, sharing a toy. In 1997 a teenage boy in Kentucky warned classmates that "something big" was going to happen. The next day he took a gun to school and shot eight classmates, killing three. Mister Rogers' response was, "Oh, wouldn't the world be a different place if he had said, 'I'm going to do something really little tomorrow.'" Rogers dedicated a week's worth of shows to the theme of "Little and Big" on how little things can be done with great care.

Rogers was drawing on a long moral tradition, that the last shall be first. It wasn't just Donald Trump who reversed that morality, though he does represent a cartoonish version of the idea that winners are better than losers, the successful are better than the weak. That morality got reversed long before Trump came on the scene, by an achievement-oriented success culture, by a culture that swung too far from humble and earnest caritas.

Rogers was singing from a song sheet now lost, a song sheet that once joined conservative evangelicals and secular progressives. The song sheet may be stacked somewhere in a drawer in the national attic, ready for reuse once again.

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David Brooks became a New York Times Op-Ed columnist in September 2003. He has been a senior editor at The Weekly Standard, a contributing editor at Newsweek and the Atlantic Monthly, and is currently a commentator on PBS.