

All stories are about coming home

Today is my father's birthday. He's been gone for three decades — if he were alive he would be 104.

He was still very much with us when we gathered at the home place above Idaho's Clearwater River on Father's Day. Our mother was there, too, in the memories we shared, in our expressions, in our voices. All five of us told the same stories we always tell. Of course we already know these stories, sometimes even filling in each other's words.

In fact, that's why we gather every summer, I found myself thinking. True, we catch each other up on the events of our lives, but what we're really there for is to touch each other. To say this is us. This is what we remember, this is how the air smells, how the light comes through the pine over by the cabin, how syringa lights the hill above the house in June.

Our children are grown now, so there were new stories, too. Strong voices, deeper laughs. One of the smart young women teased us about not listening as well as we talked. If you can imagine.

But we were all ears when the banjo and guitar came out of their cases. Those guys are good. And my brother's fiancé — a gentle, thought-

ful therapist — was amazed as everyone joined in on Waiting for a Train, a depression-era Jimmie Rodgers song about a hobo trying to get home. "You all know the words?" Well, we all had the same father, we told her.

Stories shape the very idea of family. Of community, of country, of the world. For better or worse, of course. And stories shape our own lives. Fortunately, we can change the story, interpret what we see in the world around us in new ways.

Sounds simple. As you and I both know, it isn't.

The poet Anorak Huey has a poem about a man who comes home that brings tears to my eyes every time I read it. "We Were All Odysseus in Those Days" tells the story of a young man who "learns to shoot / & dies in the mud / an ocean away from home, / a rifle in his fingers / & the sky dripping / from his heart." But the poem is really about the young man's friend, who "watches his final breath / slip ragged into a ditch," a thing the friend carries ("wound, souvenir, backstory") back to America. It's a poem about the one who lives. The one who makes it home.

In that life, he will teach stories to young people for 40 years. Coach his daughters' softball teams. Root for

the Red Wings and Lions and Tigers. Dance well. Love generously. Be quick with a joke and firm with handshakes. If asked about the war, he'll tell you instead his favorite story — Odysseus escaping from the Cyclops with a bad pun (Nobody, that's my name, Odysseus tells the one-eyed giant) and good wine and a sharp stick. "It's about buying time / & making do ... It's about doing what it takes / to get home."

At last, Huey says, you see he has been talking about the war all along. "We all want the same thing / from this world: / Call me nobody. Let me live."

I suppose you could argue that all stories are about coming home, about finding home. A favorite title in my shelf of Ursula K. Le Guin's books is Always Coming Home. Joseph Campbell's hero's journey is about leaving the known and familiar world, yes, but also about returning, having learned. Having changed. "There and back again," as Frodo puts it.

Next month, First Draft Writers' Series will feature Apricot Anderson Irving, whose memoir The Gospel of Trees won this year's Oregon Book Award in creative nonfiction. Her book is about growing up in a missionary family in Haiti, where Irving's father,



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FROM HERE TO ANYWHERE

a Pacific Northwest horticulturalist, thought he could save Haiti by planting trees. Was this a good guiding story? she asks. And where and what is home?

The series is at 7 p.m. Thursday, July 18, at Pendleton Center for the Arts. There's no admission. I hope you can come. Bring your stories.

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

Your daily dose of optimism

Someone recently gave me a book of photos taken on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1890s. The conditions were horrible: homeless, malnourished children sleeping in a clump, barefoot in a doorway. There was a block, on Bayard Street, with 39 tenement houses, and 2,781 people squeezed into them. There were only 264 toilets on that entire block and no showers or baths. There were 441 rooms on that block with no ventilation, where people lived in the shadows, catching tuberculosis and diphtheria.

My grandfather, Bernard Levy, grew up there, off Bayard Street, a few years later. He went to a public high school and a public college and rose to become a lawyer. He spent his evenings writing letters to the editor that he hoped would be printed in The New York Times. He didn't live to see me get a job here, but I am living out his dream. Our family life, from the Lower East Side upward, is a social mobility miracle.

When you grow up with this background, you have a deep sense of the goodness and purpose of America. America is the land of milk and honey. Lincoln could go from a log cabin to the White House. A Jewish boy from the Bronx named Ralph Lifshitz could grow up to become Ralph Lauren and redefine American preppy. You could be born on the fringes and assimilate into this new thing called an American.

I used to think we could revive that story for the 21st century, but we probably can't. Too many people feel left out of it. Plus, there is no longer a single American mainstream to serve as the structural spine of the nation. Mainline Protestantism is no longer the dominant religion and cultural force. The WASP establishment no longer rules the roost. There is no white majority in our kindergartens, and soon there will be no white majority in our society.

The big three TV networks no longer dominate the culture the way they did. There is no one dominant musical genre. The national ruling class has lost legitimacy. Social trust is strongest at the local levels, which grow more polarized from one another. Politically, we're in an age of extremes.

The reality and challenge is that America has become radically pluralistic. We used to be unipolar — one dominant majority culture and a lot of minority groups that defined themselves against it. Now we're multipolar. We're all minorities now.

That could blow us to smithereens. But who knows? We could learn to be minorities together, to be what Rabbi Jonathan Sacks calls creative minorities. In a brilliant 2013 lecture, Sacks noted that when Solomon's temple was destroyed

and the Jews were cast into exile, the prophet Jeremiah had a surprising message: Go to new lands. Build houses. Plant gardens. Seek the peace and prosperity of the cities in which you settle.

Jeremiah was saying you don't need to assimilate into the new place. Nor do you need to withdraw into a culturally pure enclave. Instead, don't be afraid to be a distinct, orthodox version of yourself within a larger society. Build a rich moral community. Just don't try to universalize your faith or even become a dominant minority.

Interact with the world around you, confident in your own particularity, but realize that every time you seek to dominate others, you will wind up dominated.

This stance — aggressive interaction without an attempt to be hegemonic — made the Jews creative in three ways, Sacks argues.

First, the encounter with other cultures led to great flowerings of Jewish thought. Jews wrestled with the best ideas they encountered from outside. Second, Jews were often bridges between different civilizations. Through trade, they linked China and the West during the Middle Ages. Third, Jews emerged from their secure base and made great contributions to the wider world: Spinoza, Freud, Einstein, etc.



DAVID
BROOKS
COMMENT

Trumpifying the Federal Reserve

In late 2015 then-candidate Donald Trump accused Janet Yellen, chair of the Federal Reserve, of being part of a political conspiracy.

Yellen, he insisted, was keeping interest rates unjustifiably low in an attempt to help Hillary Clinton win the presidency.

As it happens, there were very good reasons for the Fed to keep rates low at the time. Some measures of the job market, notably prime-age employment, were still well below precrisis levels, and business investment was going through a significant slump — a sort of mini-recession.

Fast forward to the present. The employment picture is much stronger now than it was then. There are hints of an economic slowdown, partly because of the uncertainty created by Trump's trade war, but they're considerably fainter than those of 2015-16. And Trump himself keeps boasting about the economy's strength.

Yet he is openly pressuring the Fed to cut rates, and is reportedly looking for ways to demote Jay Powell, the man he himself chose to replace Yellen — declining to reappoint Yellen, according to some reports, because he didn't think she was tall enough.

But wait, there's more. While there are, as I said, hints of a slowdown here, there are much stronger warning signs in Europe, where manufacturing is slumping and recession worries are on the rise.

Yet even as he tries to bully the Fed into cutting rates, Trump flew into a rage over reports that the European Central Bank, Europe's counterpart to the Fed, is considering rate cuts of its own, which would weaken the euro and make U.S. industry less competitive.

If these various positions sound inconsistent to you, you're just not thinking about them in the right way. The common principle is simple: Monetary policy should be whatever serves Donald Trump's interests. Nothing else matters.

And Trump's current rage at the Fed should be understood mainly as an expression of frustration over the failure of his 2017 tax cut.

Yes, the tax cut gave the economy a boost, as you would expect from policies that widened the annual full-employment budget deficit by about \$400 billion. (Imagine what the Obama economy would have looked like if Congress had let him spend \$400 billion a year on, say, infrastructure.) But it was a pretty modest boost, considering, with much of the tax cut being used just to buy back corporate stock.

More to the point, the tax cut was a political bust: Trump isn't getting much credit for good economic numbers, and a plurality of the white working-class voters on whom the tweeter in chief depends believe (correctly) that his pol-

icies mainly benefit people richer than themselves.

So Trump is, in effect, demanding that the Fed bail him out of the consequences of his own policy failures. And if that were the whole story, the appropriate response would be some polite, Fed-speak version of "Go to hell."

But as it happens, Trump and his tantrums aren't the whole story. There is, in fact, a strong case that the Fed was too quick to raise interest rates from 2015 to 2019 — that it underestimated how much slack there still was in the U.S. economy and overestimated the economy's underlying strength (which it has done consistently over the past decade).

And there is correspondingly a case for partially reversing recent Fed rate hikes, and cutting rates now as insurance against a possible future slump — getting ahead of the curve. Donald Trump is the worst possible person to be making this argument, but that doesn't mean that the argument is wrong.

So what should the Fed do? Central bankers, like those running the Fed, try to portray themselves as apolitical and technocratic. This is never quite true in practice, but it's an ideal toward which they strive. Thanks to Trump, however, whatever the Fed does next will be seen as deeply political. If it does cut rates despite low unemploy-

ment, this will be seen as giving up its independence and letting Trump dictate policy. If it doesn't, Trump will lash out even harder.

And if I were Powell, I'd be worried about an even worse scenario. Suppose the Fed were to cut rates, and growth and inflation end up being higher than expected. Conventional policy would then call for reversing the rate cut — right on the eve of the 2020 election. The political firestorm would be horrific.

And I'm sorry, but in Trump's America no institution can ignore the political ramifications of its actions, if only because these ramifications will affect its ability to do its job in the future.

What this means for monetary policy, I think, is that while straight economics says that the Fed should try to get ahead of the curve, the political trap Trump has created argues that it should hold off — that it should insist that its policy is "data-dependent," and wait for clear evidence of a serious slowdown before acting.

Now, this might mean that if the Fed does eventually cut rates, whatever boost this gives the economy (which would be limited in any case, since rates are already quite low) will come too late to help Trump in the 2020 election. But if that's what happens, Trump will have only himself to blame.

Paul Krugman is a columnist for the New York Times.