

# Some free advice for life

Our daughter, Annie, recently graduated from high school. For her and the dozen or so fellow classmates — such as the numbers at Griswold High School in beautiful Helix — it was a time of genuine celebration with friends and family.

For the second year in a row, we were lucky enough to have a contingent of some of my favorite relatives from the Willamette Valley come and partake of the festivities at the Helix Rodeo. The fact that they are related to the co-valedictorian of this year's crop of students (yes, I am a very proud father) gave them reason enough to stay for an extra day or two over Memorial Day weekend, which, in my opinion, is about the most pleasant time of year in rural Eastern Oregon because it falls between our two seasons of mud and dust.

While they were in the area, I took my cousins on a number of "tours" to show off our Briar Patch (anyone remember Br'er Rabbit and the tales of Uncle Remus?). My cousins are all slightly older than me — a couple of them are even approaching that mysterious station in life I've vaguely heard about called "retirement" — and, hence, are in the stage of contemplation about what really matters in life. As we traversed gravel, and even dirt (there's a big difference) roads through the rolling hills and sparsely populated terrain of my "neighborhood," we exchanged opinions regarding success, well-being

and happiness — important things for recent high school graduates to consider.

I always start with my personal three commandments:

- Work hard.
- Be honest.
- Have fun — in that order.

In my opinion, we Americans are all too likely to focus too much on having fun before our work is complete. In fact, when I used to drop the kids off at school when they were too young to drive the 7 miles themselves, I simply admonished them to work hard and be honest and, barring unforeseen catastrophe or calamity, the rest would fall into place.

Strive for perfection — even though you'll seldom attain it. Don't be someone who doesn't give a stinky large rodent's posterior and leaves behind a sloppy job not well done that someone else has to fix or clean up.

Remember names of folks upon whom you depend and treat them with the respect they deserve. Foremost on this list in my experience would be the hired help who do the "grunt work" — the secretary who knows where everything is, and the neighbor's dog, because he is an astute judge of a person's true character.

If you go through a gate that was closed when you came to it, close it after you pass through. Sometimes, this might even mean using the fence-stretcher on the back of the flatbed. In short, leave stuff like you found it, especially if it's someone else's stuff.

Learn how to change a flat tire and send an email. For anyone who knows me, they will readily affirm that I am far more adept at the former than the latter. But, to a limited degree, even I have made an attempt to become minimally functional at tasks required in modern times — though not necessarily willingly. The inability of one to change a flat can be blamed on simple irresponsible parenting. In short, care enough about your kids to teach them things that are important.

While it is important to know when to keep your mouth shut, it's best not to keep information or secrets from your spouse or your banker. Each of them holds your financial future in their hands and, if they choose, can make your life really difficult if they have a bone to pick.

Always carry matches and a shovel. In a more broad sense, be prepared. You never know when you may have to start a fire — or put one out.

Write things down, but don't always keep score. I believe record-keeping is imperative; everything from when your grandparents were born to balancing your checkbook. However, don't keep exact "tabs" on how many rounds you've bought the neighbors or vice versa. Most people have a pretty fair assessment of who (or who isn't) packing their share of the load.

I would never purport this to be enough guidance to get through the next seven or eight decades after high school,



**MATT WOOD**  
FROM THE TRACTOR

it's just some free advice. And remember, (usually) you get what you pay for.

*Matt Wood, a community columnist for the East Oregonian, lives and farms near Helix.*



## Dems, please don't drive me away

I could never in a million years vote for Donald Trump. So my question to Democrats is:

Will there be a candidate I can vote for? According to a recent Gallup poll, 35% of Americans call themselves conservative, 35% call themselves moderate and 26% call themselves liberal. The candidates at the debates this week fall mostly within the 26%. The party seems to think it can win without any of the 35% of us in the moderate camp, the ones who actually delivered the 2018 midterm win.

The progressive narrative is dominating in part because progressives these days have a direct and forceful story to tell and no interest in compromising it. It's dominating because no moderate wants to bear the brunt of progressive fury by opposing it.

It's also dominating because the driving dynamic in this campaign right now is not who can knock off Joe Biden, the more moderate front-runner. It's who can survive the intense struggle between Elizabeth Warren, Bernie Sanders and others to be the surviving left-wing alternative. All the energy and competition is on the progressive side. Biden tries to bob and weave above it all while the whole debate pulls sharply leftward.

The party is moving toward all sorts of positions that drive away moderates and make it more likely the nominee will be unelectable. And it's doing it without too much dissent.

First, there is health care. When Warren and Kamala Harris raised their hands and said that they would eliminate employer-based health insurance, they made the most important gesture of the campaign so far. Over 70% of Americans with insurance through their employers are satisfied with their health plan. Warren, Harris and Sanders would take that away.

According to a Hill-HarrisX survey, only 13% of Americans say they would prefer a health insurance system with no private plans. Warren and Sanders pin themselves, and perhaps the Democratic Party, to a 13% policy idea. Trump is smiling.

Second, there is the economy. All the Democrats seem to have decided to run a Trump-style American carnage campaign. The economy is completely broken. It only benefits a tiny sliver. Yet in a CNN poll, 71% of Americans say that the economy is very or somewhat good. We're in the longest recovery in American history and the benefits are finally beginning to flow to those who need them most. Overall wages are rising by 3.5%, and wages for those in the lowest pay quartile are rising by well over 4%, the highest of all groups.

Democrats have caught the catastrophizing virus that inflicts the Trumpian right. They take a good point — that capitalism needs to be reformed to reduce inequality — and they radi-

calize it so one gets the impression they want to undermine capitalism altogether.

Third, Democrats are wandering into dangerous territory on immigration. They properly trumpet the glories that immigrants bring to this country. But the candidates can't let anybody get to the left of them on this issue. So now you've got a lot of candidates who sound operationally open borders. Progressive parties all over the world are getting decimated because they have fallen into this pattern.

Fourth, Democrats are trying to start a populist vs. populist campaign against Trump, which is a fight they cannot win. Democratic populists talk as if the only elite in America is big business, Big Pharma — the top 1%. This allows them to sound populist without actually going after their donor bases — the highly educated affluent people along the coasts.

But the big divide in America is not between the top 1% and the bottom 99. It's between the top 20% and the rest. These are the highly educated Americans who are pulling away from everybody else and who have built zoning restrictions and meritocratic barriers to make sure outsiders can't catch up.

If Democrats run a populist campaign against the business elite, Trump will run a broader populist campaign against the entire educated elite. His populism is more compelling to people who respond to such things. After all, he is actually despised by the American elite, unlike the Democrats.

Finally, Democrats aren't making the most compelling moral case against Donald Trump. They are good at pointing to Trump's cruelties, especially toward immigrants. They are good at describing the ways he is homophobic and racist. But the rest of the moral case against Trump means hitting him from the right as well as the left.

A decent society rests on a bed of manners, habits, traditions and institutions. Trump is a disrupter. He rips to shreds the codes of politeness, decency, honesty and fidelity, and so renders society a savage world of dog eat dog. Democrats spend very little time making this case because defending tradition, manners and civility sometimes cuts against the modern progressive temper.

The debates illustrate the dilemma for moderate Democrats. If they take on progressives they get squashed by the passionate intensity of the left. If they don't, the party moves so far left that it can't win in the fall.

Right now we've got two parties trying to make moderates homeless.

*David Brooks is a columnist for the New York Times.*

## The S word, the F word and the ballot

What did you think of the bunch of socialists you just saw debating onstage?

Wait, you may protest, you didn't see any socialists up there. And you'd be right. The Democratic Party has clearly moved left in recent years, but none of the presidential candidates are anything close to being actual socialists — no, not even Bernie Sanders, whose embrace of the label is really more about branding ("I'm anti-establishment!") than substance.

Nobody in these debates wants government ownership of the means of production, which is what socialism used to mean. Most of the candidates are, instead, what Europeans would call "social democrats": advocates of a private-sector-driven economy, but with a stronger social safety net, enhanced bargaining power for workers and tighter regulation of corporate malfeasance. They want America to be more like Denmark, not more like Venezuela.

Leading Republicans, however, routinely describe Democrats, even those on the right of their party, as socialists. Indeed, all indications are that denunciations of Democrats' "socialist" agenda will be front and center in the general election campaign. And everyone in the news media accepts this as the normal state of affairs.

Which goes to show the extent to which Republican extremism has been accepted simply as a fact of life, barely worth mentioning.

To see what I mean, imagine the media firestorm, the screams about lost civility, we'd experience if any prominent Democrat described Republicans as a party of fascists, let alone if Democrats made that claim the centerpiece of their national campaign. And such an accusation would indeed be somewhat over the top — but it would be a lot closer to the truth than calling Democrats socialists.

The other day *The New York Times* published an op-ed that used analysis of party platforms to place U.S. political parties on a left-right spectrum along with their counterparts abroad. The study found that the Republican Party is far to the right of mainstream European conservative parties. It's even to the right of anti-immigrant parties like Britain's UKIP and France's National Rally. Basically, if we saw something like America's Republicans in another country, we'd classify them as white nationalist extremists.

True, this is just one study. But it matches up with lots of other evidence. Political scientists who use congressional votes to track ideology find that Republicans have moved drastically to the right over the past four decades, to the point where they are now more conservative than they were at the height of the Gilded Age.

Or just compare the Republi-

cans, point by point, with parties almost everyone would classify as right-wing authoritarians — parties like Hungary's Fidesz, which has preserved some of the forms of democracy but has effectively created a permanent one-party state.

Fidesz has cemented its power by politicizing the judiciary, creating rigged election rules, suppressing opposition media and using the power of the state to reward the party's cronies while punishing businesses that don't toe the line. Does any of this sound like something that can't happen here?

In fact, does any of it sound like something that isn't already happening here, and which Republicans will do much more of if they get the chance?

One might even argue that the GOP stands out among the West's white nationalist parties for its exceptional willingness to crash right through the guardrails of democracy.

Extreme gerrymandering, naked voter suppression and stripping power from offices the other party manages to win all the same — these practices seem if anything more prevalent here than in the failing democracies of Eastern Europe.

Oh, and isn't it remarkable how blasé we've become about threats of legal persecution and/or physical violence against anyone who criticizes a Republican president?

So it's really something to see Republicans trying to tar Democrats as un-American socialists. If they want to see a party that really has broken with fundamental American values, they should look in the mirror.

But that won't happen, of course. Whoever the Democrats nominate — even if it's Joe Biden — Republicans will paint him or her as the second coming of Hugo Chávez. The only question is whether it will work.

It might not, or at least not as well as in the past. By spending decades calling everything that might improve Americans' lives "socialist," Republicans have squandered much of the accusation's force. And Donald Trump, who was installed in office with Russian help and clearly prefers foreign dictators to democratic allies, is probably less able to play the "Democrats are unpatriotic" card than previous Republican presidents.

Still, a lot will depend on how the news media handle dishonest attacks. Will we keep seeing headlines that repeat false claims ("Trump Says Democrats Will Ban Hamburgers"), with the information that the claim is false buried deep inside the article? Will we get coverage of actual policy proposals, as opposed to horse-race analysis that only asks how those proposals seem to be playing?

I guess we'll soon find out.

*Paul Krugman is a columnist for the New York Times.*



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