

Opinion

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EDITORIAL

Reflecting on our commitment

Christmas is nigh and I'm hoping that snowflakes will be falling this evening, gracing every streetlight with a soft orange halo and transforming the ordinary into the magical.

I continue to believe that the phrase "White Christmas" is among the most poignant in our language.

The close of the year is the traditional time to reflect on the past, of course, and the Herald has rather more to reflect on this year than is typical.

Most notably, we moved.

In late May the Herald went from the First Street building that was the newspaper's home for more than half a century, to our new office at 1668 Resort St.

The transition wasn't seamless — no move is, I'd wager — but we continued, without interruption, to deliver news to our readers.

It's what we do.

And it's what we've been doing for almost a century and a half. Since 1870, to be specific.

This is no small matter, no small commitment that we've made to the residents of Baker City and Baker County.

But we think this community deserves nothing less than a newspaper that you can rely on, come what may. A newspaper that not only informs you but one that makes you laugh and perhaps even cry, one that prompts you to exclaim in agreement and to mutter in disagreement, and above all a newspaper that enriches your feelings about this place we share.

That's what we've done, what we do today on Christmas Eve, and what we'll continue to do.

— Jayson Jacoby, Baker City Herald editor

GUEST EDITORIAL

Editorial from The (Bend) Bulletin:

Oregon lawmakers will consider banning single-use plastic straws when they meet in 2019, and as things stand, a ban seems likely.

The bill would ban the straws in restaurants, but not in things such as soup kitchens. Even then, if a restaurant customer asked for plastic, the old-fashioned straws would be allowed.

But there are drawbacks to a ban that should be considered alongside a ban bill.

Alternatives to plastic are expensive. At the consumer level, a person can buy 500 plastic straws for just under \$19. The same number of paper straws comes in at \$21.99, and hay (seriously) straws are \$30 for 500. Prices pretty much skyrocket from there, as the \$17.49 price tag for a mere 20 bamboo reusable straws makes clear.

Then there's the cleanliness problem reusable straws would present for restaurants, if restaurants choose to go that route. They'd have to be cleaned as well as any other food service item, though no other piece of silver, glass or dishware is a relatively small tube with a relatively small opening. Getting the insides of straws clean might take some fancy new equipment. If you've ever watched a small child drink from a straw, you know how important that would be.

Nor would the problems go away if restaurants simply eliminated straws. Those who like to sip a drink while driving would face particular problems. That, as anyone who has ever had to drink that way while driving can tell you, can be a genuinely messy affair, especially if roads are rough.

Surely lawmakers have better things to do with their time than the proposed sort of ban on straws. They should focus on those better things and let the rest of us continue to drive and stay dry.

Letters to the editor

• We welcome letters on any issue of public interest. Customer complaints about specific businesses will not be printed.

• The Baker City Herald will not knowingly print false or misleading claims. However, we cannot verify the accuracy of all statements in letters to the editor.

• Letters are limited to 350 words; longer letters will be edited for length. Writers are limited to one letter every 15 days.

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Don't let nostalgia define you

The days huddled up against Christmas aren't always filled with cheerful times, despite what ads, television specials and everybody else's Facebook posts appear to promise. For many of us, they bring a sense of profoundly mixed, if not actually contradictory, emotions.

There's nostalgia, which can be sentimentally satisfying ("Remember when Grandpa used to smoke his Meerschau pipe in front of the fireplace?") or unsettling ("Remember how Grandma used to scream when Grandpa smoked in the house?").

Nostalgia was originally defined as a disease of acute homesickness, but it's been modified over the years so that we've come to regard it as an emotion we're meant to carry with us, like bulky gifts, all through December. But like gifts that nobody really wants and which come at great cost, nostalgia can be more of a burden than a blessing.

Does it genuinely honor the past to keep the wounds of our losses fresh? Wouldn't those we've lost be more grateful for good thoughts rather than perpetual mourning?

For years after my mother died, I mourned her deeply, especially at Christmas. My older brother finally took me aside after one family meal when I'd been not only spirited but also rather upset at the fun other people were having when I was still in pain. "You're using your misery as a votive candle to our mother," Hugo said. "It doesn't help her, it doesn't help you and it sure as hell doesn't help anybody else. You need to change this before it becomes what



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you do for the rest of your life."

I took him seriously: I got into therapy and learned, over many years, ways to work with and through my sense of isolation.

I also learned that everybody had troubles of their own; I was not the only one who had to make an effort. Even if the faces I saw seemed merry, it didn't mean their lives were easier than mine.

Nurturing a sense of defiant bereavement didn't shield me from the worries and sadness of the world. I had to teach myself to live with — but not be defined by — nostalgia.

Some of us are troubled, particularly at this time of year, by the thoughts of what we might have had, what we once had, what others have and what we might not ever have no matter how many wish-lists we make.

That's one of the reasons the British tell ghost stories at Christmas: The past is with us when the year swings wide open into the dark winter night. Even if your holidays are spent in a warm climate, or in the Southern hemisphere where the days are at their longest, memories of what's gone are close enough to leave a chill.

Charles Dickens offers the season's most haunting tale in "A Christmas Carol." I've been fortunate enough to spend a lot of time with that work, having written an introduction to the Signet

edition of the book.

"A Christmas Carol" is about loneliness; money and greed are just sidebars. The most important passage happens when, under the spell of the Ghost of Christmas Past, Scrooge confronts his utterly abandoned childhood self.

The Ghost points out that, although other children have been gathered up by loving families, one boy remains. "The school is not quite deserted... A solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still." Scrooge says he knows it and begins to sob, weeping "to see his poor forgotten self as he had used to be."

In this moment, Scrooge discovers that generosity is a transferable commodity: it can move from one's self to others. Once Scrooge discovers a well-spring of understanding and sympathy for himself, he can direct it outwards.

Scrooge also learns — and this is an equally hard lesson — to accept those sincere offers of camaraderie, community and connection he had previously dismissed. By reconciling with the past while finding hope for the future, Scrooge can live fully in the present.

I still light votive candles in memory of those I cherished, but I don't use them as a shield anymore. Instead, I let them illuminate the room, grateful that they keep the December dark at bay. I wish, my friends, the same for you.

Gina Barreca is a board of trustees distinguished professor of English literature at the University of Connecticut and the author of 10 books. She can be reached at www.ginabarreca.com.

GUEST EDITORIAL

Editorial from The Chicago Tribune:

One of America's partners in the Middle East fight against terror and chaos does a lot of dirty, dangerous work for little acclaim: the Syrian Kurds. Their militias battled Islamic State on the ground as the U.S. pounded away mainly from the air. The Syrian Kurds are still on the ground, but they've also been left high and dry by President Donald Trump.

Trump on Wednesday, with little apparent thought to the consequences, announced he will recall all 2,000 American troops from Syria, making his own declaration of "mission accomplished" over Islamic State, or ISIS, in Syria. "We have defeated ISIS in Syria, my only reason for being during the Trump Presidency," he tweeted. Good satisfying tweet, but dead wrong and bad policy.

Islamic State, a ragtag army of extremists, stunned Iraq and the United States five years ago by expanding quickly and waging sharp, sudden attacks in the deserts of Iraq and Syria. For a while the group gobbled territory,

enslaved populated areas and even knocked Iraq's army on its heels. The tide eventually turned, thanks in part to the Syrian Kurds, who were key to pushing Islamic State out of its putative capital, Raqqa, Syria.

These days Islamic State has about 1 percent of its former territory, but the group's poisonous ideology remains intact, as does a vacuum of power in war-torn Syria. Cancers of all types can recur: Bashar Assad is still the barbarous leader of Syria, while Russia and Iran are still playing destabilizing games. This is no time to up and leave. On Dec. 11, U.S. envoy to the region Brett McGurk said: "I think it's fair to say Americans will remain on the ground after the physical defeat of (Islamic State), until we have the pieces in place to ensure that that defeat is enduring."

Trump decided otherwise, going with his gut it seems, in defiance of members of his own administration and party. Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham said evacuating Syria would be a huge mistake and morale boost to Islamic State.

Trump offered no compelling argument or replacement strategy to protect American interests going forward. He told Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan he didn't want to spend any more money and time in Syria.

This was great news to Erdogan, because he views Kurds as enemies and terrorists bent on carving out an independent state on Turkish soil. With U.S. forces out of the area, Turkey would be free to attack the Kurds in Syria. Erdogan's isn't the only happy face. Also pleased with Trump's decision: Assad, who gets some breathing room; Iran, which uses Syria as a conduit to deliver arms to Hezbollah, an Israeli foe in Lebanon; and Russia, which built up a military presence in Syria to project power in the Middle East. The less U.S. activity on the ground in Syria, the greater the instability.

Trump has a bad habit of separating pronouncements from facts. A rash decision to bring home American forces looks good on his Twitter feed, but it's dangerous in reality.

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