

EDITOR'S DESK

Still fighting racism, one year later

A year ago this week, the front page of the Hermiston Herald featured the headline "Hermiston's Black Lives Matter protests continue."

The article was one of several I wrote last summer on Hermiston residents taking to the streets to advocate for racial justice, joining millions of people in cities around the world.

So, what has happened since then?

The protests certainly sparked increased discussion about racism. They brought additional awareness to systemic problems, and inspired some state legislatures to pass police reform bills.

Much of the "change" that has happened has felt superficial, however. Corporations' public relations departments whipped up a social media post about how racism is bad, and then blithely went back to ignoring legitimate complaints from employees of color about racist bosses, unequal pay and all-white boards of directors.

Take the NFL. Last year, the league, under pressure, stopped calling its football team based in Washington, D.C., a name considered a racial slur. But it continues to feature only three Black head coaches in a



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A Black Lives Matter protester waves a flag as the sun sets over the dueling groups of protesters in Hermiston on Aug. 21, 2020.

league where 60% of the players are Black.

Last week, in the face of petitions and other pressure, the NFL announced it would no longer use "race-norming" to evaluate the settlements for players' brain injury claims. The practice, according to the Associated Press, "assumes that Black patients start with worse cognitive function than whites and other non-Blacks," resulting in some retired Black players being denied settlements that they would have received had their brain function after

a head injury been measured against the higher assumed baseline that white players are measured against.

Like corporations, we can't just write a nice little anti-racism social media post and call it a day. Whatever work you put in a year ago, that work is not over.

Start by looking at yourself. Do you make assumptions about the people you come across, based on their race? Do you share social media posts that use dehumanizing language to talk about certain groups of people, like undocumented immi-

grants? Do you listen to pundits who openly repeat white supremacist talking points claiming elites are trying to replace white Americans with non-white immigrants?

Then look at the people around you. Do the people you associate with feel comfortable saying racist things around you because they don't expect you'll call them out? Are you someone that people who look different than you feel comfortable hanging out with? Are the organizations you're affiliated with a welcoming place for people of color? Does the company you work for do a good job of hiring and promoting a diverse mix of people?

Then look at your broader community. Are there racist laws on the books in your city, county or state that need changing? Are there discrepancies in outcomes when it comes to education, health, finances, justice or other essential components of society?

I guarantee you the answer to at least some of the questions above will reveal something you can work to change for the better.

For years, visitors to Hermiston coming in on South Highway 395 have been greeted by a sign that proclaims, "We are building an inclusive community." It's a worthy goal, but one that we haven't fully achieved yet.

COLUMN

Open your eyes at the Umatilla Museum

On May 8 the Umatilla Museum reopened its doors to the public, Thursday to Saturday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m., each day.

But who cares about history, let alone local history, let alone Umatilla County history?

You should. Visiting the Umatilla Museum is a step toward eye-opening empowerment through questioning our world. It is liberation, detaching from "The Matrix" of disinterest and apathy surrounding our nature and identity.

In this process of liberation, history provides us with first with continuity, a connection to preceding generations and legacy. From the construction of McNary Dam that keeps YouTube buzzing, to Native Americans who left their mark on daily language, to artifacts marking military veterans' sacrifices that provided freedom to write this article, reflecting on cause-effect relationships unlocks a cascade of questions and subsequent insight. Absent these questions, we see only what is directly before us. In turn we erroneously believe ourselves to be a "blip," rather than belonging to a continuous flow.

From continuity comes humility. That is, while we are indeed the doers, the creators of today, as part of that flow of Homo sapiens there is little fundamentally new under the sun. Umatilla County's earlier housewives and craftsmen had different technologies but similar aims; and while future Umatilla

tillians will develop new tools, the purposes of these will be familiar. Humility acts as a thoroughfare connecting past to present to future and back again. It allows us to learn from all members of this flow to whom we are neither superior nor inferior. It affords us the ability to view our contemporaries as fellow travelers rather than as rivals.

Humility is neither natural nor easy to obtain, however. When 2021's teens reflect on the Umatilla Museum's 1950s editions of the Umatilla Viking, they may struggle to look past the "old fashioned-ness," to fight a desire to look down on predecessors. If today's teens are open to seeing similarities with this earlier generation, however, they will find them. Accepting that one is not superior is a kind of "humble pie," an unpleasant part of the liberation process.

Despite such immediate bitterness, "humble pie" provides comfort. Yes, we should strive to be better, as individuals, morally and materially; yes, let's push the frontiers of technology. Nonetheless, we can take comfort in our status as mere homo sapiens.

Psychology and philosophy have value as theory, but are nothing compared to the millennia of field data (a.k.a. the "history") we have on Homo sapiens. While all the billions of us in this human laboratory have been individuals and responsible for personal actions, as a collective we have bumbled through, simply doing the best we can. Seeing ourselves, friends, and family in the faces of Ancient Egyptians or even of Umatilla's 19th century

pioneers can give us comfort, making us feel less alone in our shortcomings and limitations.

Once possessing comfort we are equipped to generate empathy for others, be they in the past or in the present. We can put ourselves in the shoes of a Umatilla railroad worker, or of Lewis and Clark. We can imagine that were we 19th century pioneers or Native Americans, we might have engaged in the same atrocities for which we judge them. Like "humble pie, "empathy pie" is bitter — swallowing it requires us to forgo our instinct to judge — but doing so is again the only way to unlock and unlatch.

A progression from continuity to humility to comfort to empathy under our belt, we can navigate forward with confidence. We can propel ourselves by the warmth of our predecessors, from Umatilla County and beyond. With lighter hearts we can continue writing the story written by frail Homo sapiens, one we realize to be as repetitive (cyclical) as it is progressive (linear).

Perhaps most important, we can give ourselves the power and others the permission to depersonalize challenges, shortcomings, and conflicts.

We are individuals but also part of something much bigger than any one of us. Recognize this, unlatch from apathy and disinterest, and open your eyes. Make a visit to the Umatilla Museum as part of this process.

Alex Cooper works in Migrant Education for InterMountain Education Service District.



Alex Cooper

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sports fan wants to know

I have a couple of questions for the Hermiston City Council.

Why is there no public tennis court in Hermiston? I checked; all belong to school district. Hermiston has a large tennis community that plays year-round. Compared with other outdoor sports, tennis courts would be used more frequently than fields for other sports. Please build at least a group of four.

The baseball field located next to the Field of Dreams was named Shockman Field to thank the family for the construction of the field with their heavy equipment and many man-hours of labor. The sign that named the field is now gone. What happened? Please replace the sign to continue honoring their hard work.

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It is the policy of the Hermiston Herald to correct errors as soon as they are discovered. Incorrect information will be corrected on Page 2A. Errors committed on the Opinion page will be corrected on that page. Corrections also are noted in the online versions of our stories.

Please contact the editor at editor@hermistonherald.com or call (541) 564-4533 with issues about this policy or to report errors.

SUBMIT A LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Letters Policy: Letters to the Editor is a forum for the Hermiston Herald readers to express themselves on local, state, national or world issues. Brevity is good, but longer letters should be kept to 250 words.

No personal attacks; challenge the opinion, not the person. The Hermiston Herald reserves the right to edit letters for length and for content.

Letters must be original and signed by the writer or writers. Anonymous letters will not be printed. Writers should include a telephone number so they can be reached for questions. Only the letter writer's name and city of residence will be published.

OBITUARY POLICY

The Hermiston Herald publishes paid obituaries. The obituary can include small photos and, for veterans, a flag symbol at no charge. Expanded death notices will be published at no charge. These include information about services. Obituaries may be edited for spelling, proper punctuation and style.

Obituaries and notices may be submitted online at hermistonherald.com/obituaryform, by email to obits@hermistonherald.com, by fax to 541-276-8314, placed via the funeral home or in person at the Hermiston Herald or East Oregonian offices. For more information, call 541-966-0818 or 1-800-522-0255, x221.