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Two stories becoming one

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My wife has a friend who followed her graduation from the UO by suspending herself in trees in protest of imminent logging. Loggers would gather a hundred feet below her to shout, threaten, try to talk her down. Given her training in the liberal arts, she found herself following these shouted conversations in all kinds of directions, usually resulting in mutual affirmations of life in Oregon, in the woods, in a common sense of home. One day, a logger heading back to town from felling trees asked her if he could bring her anything.

Two Stories Becoming One

by Kim Stafford
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"I'd love a book," she shouted down to him.

"I'll bring you my favorite," he called back.

The next day, when she lowered a cord the hundred feet down to him, he tied on his book for her. She spent the day, suspended on her three-by-six-foot platform in the forest canopy, reading David James Duncan's *The*

River Why. This is one of many stories about our common ground.

I believe in the common story we are trying to live in Oregon. I believe in the conversation among us all, the search for the story of our future, which we will write together. We are many stories becoming one.

Photograph by Marior Obar



What is this place called Oregon? What principle gathers this place into one idea? It can't be weather, despite what strangers say. We are a land of rain and a land of sun. On the coast, expect rain. But out in Willowa County they say, "We've got four seasons-every day." And it can't be the economy. We were timber; we were wheat. Now we are those and many other things. The principle of our Oregon identity is not weather, and it is not work. It is, instead, a contradiction. Our identity in the Oregon country consists of two stories that must be healed into one.

I find these two stories everywhere in our state, two versions of our character and our mission. These are the twin stories of the traveler coming to this place, and of the resident in this place. These two stories are at war in us. We must make peace between them.

In one story, we are a band of travelers newly arrived in the promised land. We come in a ship under sail, two centuries ago, with Robert Gray, viewing and naming the coast. We arrive in hatchet-carved canoes with Lewis and Clark, skidding off the mountains and hurtling down the great river of the western slope. We ride the undammed waters of the Lochsa, the Clearwater, the Snake, and the Columbia. Like young salmon, we find the salt taste of the sea for the first time. We marvel at the gray and the green land, its rain and sun, its birds, its pure waters, and its people: Klickitat, Chinook, Molalla, Clackamas. We write a long letter home, a report to our president, describing the place, its sparkling treasures, its dangers.

In this same story, we are a band of pioneers who follow a deepening rut of dust and mud across the continent. In our wagons we hold hives of bees. We hold our families. We hold apple saplings. We grip books of Genesis that explain our mission. We have guns and plows, axes and spinning wheels. We have pigs to root deep in the camas fields, to prepare them for wheat.

In this same story, this odyssey peopled with travelers, we are Woody Guthrie, come to this place for a month of creation in the Great Depression to write songs like "Pastures of Plenty" and "Roll On, Columbia." We are my own parents, Dorothy and Bill, arriving here indirectly from the Midwest by way of World War II. We are a band of refugees, boat people on their own kind of Mayflower from Vietnam, we are Old Believers, we are Finns, we are Palestinian, Hmong, Ethiopian, Russian Pentacostal. We have heard that this is a safe and beautiful place, sometimes prosperous, sometimes welcoming. We are a story of arrival in hope.

This story is a young one. It has only been happening here for a couple of centuries. It happens today. In this story, we arrive from California, refugees from a prosperity, a golden dream that went somehow askew. We hear that there is a jade green dream to the north, and we seek it. We want to start over, and

because we are new to Oregon, we make a few mistakes in our effort to live right. We donate a tithe to the Sierra Club, then cut the trees in our yard so we can have a clear view of the mountain. We believe our wants are simple: a home, a job to do, a mountain to view and to visit. What else will we need in a place this fine?

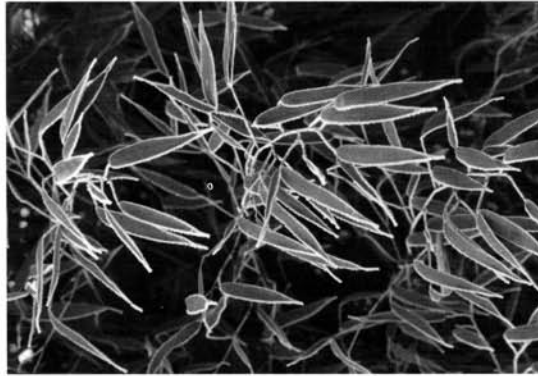
The answer is this: We will need understanding. We will need to learn to care for the things we brag about. We will need to know, and then to live, the second story of this place.

For there is this other story in Oregon: it is secondary, and it is older, and it is the future. It is a story that has been battered, assaulted, but will save us when we learn to tell it and to live it. This other story I do not know well. I am only forty-six. It is the story of longer residence, of the Native way matured by more winters than there are bricks in Pioneer Square, more summers than there are sticky children at the Rose Parade. We glimpse this story sometimes, those of us who have come to the Oregon country to stay.

I glimpsed this one Sunday at the giveaway at Nespelem, when the dancing stopped, and a fancy dancer Native man stepped forward into the ring, holding up a bridle, calling out the name of a certain child. "To honor the passing on of traditional values," he said, "I would give to a certain grandmother and a certain granddaughter the gift of this bridle, which was my grandfather's, and a saddle which was my father's, and a mare that is mine, a young one, and fertile." He called the name of the granddaughter again and again, until she came out from the darkness, a young one, shy, maybe eight years old in her long skin dress and beads, came out from the shadows and took the bridle without a word, and disappeared.

In this story, this Native way, we do not live by the sale of commodities. We live by an exchange of gifts. We live by recognizing that this place is giving gifts to us, every day, every moment of sun and clear rain, and we can only live here by giving to each other, and giving back to the land. That is how we heal the two stories: by giving and giving back.

We have to look each other in the eye and tell this story with care, for we live in a place where the two stories are at war. In these two stories, two eras coexist, two ways of being. The two carry with them the desire to change the place, and the necessity of living with those changes for seven generations. A logger with his grumbling saw meets an old cedar. A fisherman pulls an ancient Chinook from the river. A farmer harrows the camas prairie. A dam's turbine swallows the oldest river of our land. Someone young meets something old. The traveler meets the resident. Our prosperity is based on the meeting of these two stories, and we need to learn to carry out this meeting. If one story kills the other, we have nothing.



Photograph by Marior Obar

Carl Jung once made a prophecy about us. Americans, he said, will finally become Indians, natives of their place. If they don't, they will die and their place will die. He was talking about us, we who care about the place we live, who care about it beyond ourselves, we who gather in this work. And I want to ask us now, we who are both travelers and residents, how do our two stories get healed into one? How do we arrive, finally, in this place, and act simply in the matured character of the Oregon country?

I can only answer this question by telling a story, Lloyd's story. Lloyd Reynolds, the international citizen of Portland, spent his last days in pain, silent, unable to speak or to write, lying in his hospital bed inwardly composing a story in his mind to give to a child. He lay on his sheet, in each waking segment of his pain, putting together the particular telling of a story he wanted to give to a slow child named Christopher. Lloyd wanted to tell Christopher the story of St. Christopher, the strong monk boy who could do nothing right. That monk boy kept praising God in odd ways. He delighted in the seeds of dandelion, and sang as he scattered them in the garden of the monastery.

Finally, in Lloyd's telling, the exasperated abbot sent monk Christopher down to the river to wait and stay out of trouble. Christopher goes hulking down the river and begins his vigil, and finally, after some days, he sees on the far bank a little child waiting to cross. Christopher strides into the water and easily wades the torrent, and he lifts the child to his shoulder to start back, but when they reach the deepest place, Christopher staggers. The child is heavier and heavier, crushing, and Christopher has to summon the deepest roots of his strength to carry the child to dry land, and set him down there. Then a light comes around them, and Christopher sees it is the holy child, who says to him, "You have been carrying all the grief of the world."

In the last hours of Lloyd's life, he summoned his deepest strength, and managed to write that story down, and after his death it became a small book for the boy Christopher. They have this book at the Cen-

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Two Stories

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tral Library in Portland, safe in the stacks, and the book ends with this thought: "We are all pilgrims traveling a path that frequently is filled with suffering. But if we share St. Christopher's loving helpfulness with each other, wild flowers will bloom along the way."

But this story doesn't end where Lloyd's life ended. It ends like this: on his last day at home, as his wife scurried to pack his suitcase for the hospital, Lloyd made his way outside to the garden, and there she found him on his knees, with a spoon, awkwardly planting flower bulbs.

"Lloyd," she said, "you will never see these flowers bloom."

He smiled at her. "They are not for me," he said, "they are for you."

The salmon coming home? They are for you. The calls of wild geese? They are for you. The last old trees? They are for you and your children, to the seventh generation and beyond. They are all blooming into being for you.

When I was a visitor in Venice, my Italian friend Pino Zennaro, whose family has been in that city for 700 years, was showing me a series of drawings he had made as a young man. His drawings showed his love for the light, the water, the bridges and windows, the boats and the soft sunlight on his native place.

"Why," I asked him, "do you not do this art now?"

He looked at me. "When I was young," he said, "I would observe things, and make a drawing of them. I would do art on paper, and give it away. I liked that work very much, but it is not enough alone. Now, I am an architect. I restore the buildings of my city. Venice is the city of history, and the city of the future. There are old ways to do things here that will be the model for the new. We are making the future vision of how people can be together. My art is my city."

We can say this: My art is my city. My art is Oregon. My art is the seventh generation. The problems of our time are political, economic, and environmental, but their solutions are cultural. For the solution to war is not war; it is knowing other people as neighbors, as common citizens of earth. The solution to poverty is not wealth; it is learning true value. The solution to environmental crisis is not scientific only; it is following the stories of our lives in this place to some convergence with the many lives sharing this place. Who will bring the two stories into one? Who will become native to this place? Who will plant the roots of color and plenty for another generation?

The true citizens of this place are those who say it this way: My art is the place I live and the people I live with. I have a job, but my art surrounds it, goes beyond. My art is my family, my tribe, my valley, my watershed: my long embrace of the Columbia's waters. Two stories? One life. This place says over and over, "My friend, I am not for me. I am for you." **Q**

Kim Stafford is Director of the Northwest Writing Institute at Lewis & Clark College. This article originally appeared in the Oregon Quarterly, Winter 1996, and is reprinted with permission.

The Oregon Center

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So it seems that the Oregon Center for the Book doesn't house "the book" but is in the business of doing what we can to see that books, reading, and libraries remain in the public consciousness. **Q**

Oregon Center for the Book:
www.osl.state.or.us/libdev/ocftbpurp.html

Center for the Book at the Library of Congress:
lcweb.loc.gov/loc/cfbook