

# The Register-Guard

## **GUEST VIEW: The age of innocence is over**

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December 27, 2020

As soon as I was old enough to leave home, I set out to find America.

I don't mean the heritage that holds the workings of our culture and institutions together, such as they do or fail to do, but the real America: the mountains, forests and deserts that awaited discovery on my hitchhiking journey, Pennsylvania to Oregon.

In the spring of my life, 1968, it was all there for the taking, or, I should say, for the joining: the peaks I climbed, the woods where I slept, the rivers where I rinsed away preconceptions. It was a journey that opened my eyes to all around me and one that shaped who I became.

Along the way, people were kind. At the sight of my irrepressible smile owing to my good fortune, drivers stopped to offer rides. Our routes coincided for an hour or sometimes a day. People fed me lunch, let me sleep in their yards, invited me to family cookouts and told stories. Listening to them was one way that I grew up — meaning one way that I opened my mind to others and to the fact that we are all different yet all the same.

Not once did I encounter the weirdness that everyone fears when I recount my exploratory youth in the 1960s. Not that everyone was saintly, but people were universally friendly. The characters I met were profoundly varied, but through it all the land beneath us defined our common ground and our common destiny. With pride, they told me about where they lived. Themes revolved around belonging to the place and recognition of its undeniable beauty as the sun set on western horizons. Awareness that we shared in the fruits of those beloved places

prevailed. I hitched from one dazzling backpacking destination to another with these vivid bouts of socialization in between.

Now 72 years old, I'm fortunate to say I still backpack in wild places, but I don't hitchhike between them anymore, and neither do others. The welcoming spirit I found back then seems to be squashed by fear of crime or the unknown, or by an alienating sense that we are no longer one people in one country — a feeling aggravated by a toxically addicting narrative of division pushed for political or profiteering means by certain elements of society.

And yet, perhaps the spirit of a shared landscape and intertwined future is just hibernating until the cultural winter thaws and springtime breaks once again for a new journey — more figurative this time around. Our common ground and shared destiny remain on the ground itself, the real America stretching coast to coast. This landscape has been our unifying principle and possession dating back to ships like the Mayflower when my ancestors were grateful for forested shores after two months at sea, and to Native Americans who had arrived at the opposite end of the continent millennia earlier.

Our destiny in a shared landscape can again unite us, though the age of innocence I enjoyed is over. How to sustain remnants of unspoiled wilds and to restore health to everyone's living space are fundamental questions for our future that now involves nothing less than the climate we've changed. With higher temperatures and nearly twice the number of people today, it's not enough to just know that we all occupy the same playing field; it's now essential that we pull together in addressing mistakes of the past that, if uncorrected, will lead to a hotter world with fires, droughts, floods and related catastrophes on a frightening path to greater loss. Like I said, the age of innocence is over. The age of redirection is here.

The kindness that I found half a century ago has faded from memory or, sadly, many of us never knew the feeling of a shared homeland that I, for a time, was privileged to know. Yet the sense of belonging, together, that I found inspiring 50 years ago might again have the power to mend our society. A new discovery

awaits anyone who is willing, in their own way, to make a journey — not just to find but also to rescue America.

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