
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

August 2021

The currency of kindness

These days, one's heart is heavy. America is in a mess. We remain sharply divided politically, as we have been for some time, but a thing far worse is afoot. We have become divorced from some simple precepts that used to rule over us all, creating against considerable odds a fabric of some comfort. That comfort has been torn away, and we've become increasingly a nation of ugliness and interpersonal brutality.

We see the viral videos. "Karens" going ballistic in Victoria's Secret, denigrating women of color and throwing temper tantrums worthy of the terrible twos. Racist epithets tossed around neighborhood convenience stores caught on security cameras, even as state legislatures outlaw the capacity of history teachers to properly evoke and teach the history of racism in the U.S. The confabulations created about political opponents have reached an apex of outlandishness hard to fathom. Sadly, it is matched by the outlandish political behavior and speech in Congress itself. Immunosuppressed cancer survivors are hounded in retail stores by those urging them to remove their face coverings. The hecklers are typically against vaccines for COVID-19, and against all attempts to create a buffer against viral spread and resurgence. So the virus, in variant forms, is

spreading and resurging. Freedom, for the hecklers, apparently has come to mean the freedom to get sick and hope you don't die.

It's hard to make sense of any of it, and reckless to try to distill it into anything easy to grasp. But somehow, as I contemplate the soon-to-be-devastated wildness that is our yard, I keep thinking of the currency of kindness and wondering where it has gone.

We've become increasingly a nation of ugliness and interpersonal brutality.

Our yard, you ask? Well, it's a tale of woe. You see, I live in a town where there are ordinances governing the appearance of yards. While not unusual, it is typically not a thing one has to face down. However, the governing factor in my town's enforcement of said regulation is the complaint. If anyone complains about a lawn, it triggers otherwise dormant mechanisms and levers of enforcement into action. This has recently happened to me and The Missus.

We have a yard dedicated to pollinators and avian life. All outdoor life, really. Last year, a

doe gave birth to two fawns in some ferns to the east side of our house. We have breeding pairs of hummingbirds, goldfinches, red-bellied and downy woodpeckers, the occasional red-headed woodpecker, and the host of warblers, sparrows, chickadees, finches, robins, cardinals and catbirds that call our wild yard home. And it is wild. I will own it. The margins have evolved into something of a tangle of shrubbery, volunteer trees, and whatever else grows in.

Now there has been a complaint, and we have engaged a fine lawnsman and his firm to neaten up our refuge. His first attempt at creating a "buffer" of neatness was insufficient. So he has his work, painful pun intended, cut out for him. And I currently am a wreck just thinking about it. Will they do too much in the wrong places, take out any nests when removing small volunteer trees or vines, or create any of a dozen other potential cataclysms for our denizens? It is a rotten way to live. Having survived primary and general election mayhem, been the target of anonymous campaign mailings in the closing days of a campaign, and endured assorted political stressors once elected, I can say I have never

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Building a better food system

I love going to the Iowa City Farmers' Market. I love the crowds, meeting up with friends, eating good food, and talking to local farmers and craftspeople. I love seeing the rainbows of heirloom vegetable varieties. Going to the market makes me feel like even here in Iowa, a bastion of industrial agribusiness and the nation's #1 pork producing state, there can still be hope for small-scale, diversified, organic farms. That hope hinges on small-scale farmers being able to continue farming. For many, the economics are precarious.

Angie Scharnhorst of Bountiful Harvest Farm said in a November 3, 2020 podcast with Paul Rasch of Wilson's Orchard & Farm, "Every year you really have to re-evaluate ... can this keep going?" Since starting to farm four years ago, Scharnhorst has not made a profit, instead relying on off-season work as an event planner to pay the bills.

Scharnhorst is not alone in finding the economics for this kind of farming daunting. Corbin Scholz of Rainbow Roots Farm is in a similar situation, pouring slim margins from farming into long-term investment in soil health on the land she leases. She gets by, thanks to seasonal work coaching high school soccer.

Both farmers are stretched to their limit, working grueling hours well beyond a typical work week. They depend on a strong community to break even: they attend farmers' markets, sell wholesale to chefs and co-ops, and offer farm shares through the community-supported agriculture model, where a customer pays upfront for weekly produce throughout the summer.

They're driven by a passion for growing outstanding veggies to

sell locally, and an uncompromising commitment to sustainable values like building soil health, minimizing use of harmful chemicals, and paying living wages for labor. Unfortunately, when it comes to food producers at large, these core values are the exception, rather than the norm.

When I asked Scharnhorst and Scholz what they need to continue growing what Scharnhorst calls "local, grown-from-good-soil-with-love food," they had some ideas. Increasing their CSA shares wouldn't help their economics. Having to grow more food requires more labor, which increases overhead.

First and foremost, they need access to land they can afford and improve year after year. Many sustainable farming practices for weed and pest management and soil quality, and investments such as adding compost, planting winter cover crops, and structures such as high tunnels, take years to work. Land security is critical. For farmers who have not inherited land nor have independent wealth, the cost of land is often prohibitively expensive.

Our local farmers also need engaged consumers who understand the value of their practices. Big grocery stores have made cheap food seem normal. It is easy to forget that we pay for cheap food one way or another. We pay when children can't swim in Iowa waterways because of harmful algal blooms or high E. coli levels from farm runoff. We pay with our health when we consume low-nutrient products laced with pesticides and hormones. We pay for it by suffering the consequences of accelerating climate change and dead zones in the Gulf.

We also pay with tax dollars. On his podcast Rasch said, "It costs more per pound for that heirloom

tomato. But how much of our tax money is going into subsidizing the industrially grown tomatoes that are shipped across the country, whether it's cheap fuel because we subsidize oil companies, or other externalized costs like water pollution?" Rasch believes consumers are key to building a better food system.

Continuing to develop a culture around local, seasonal, whole ingredients and shared meals could help. Americans spend less money (as a percentage of household income) on groceries than any other country in the world. There's a lot of money and political power tied up in keeping things the way they are. For those who are able, opting out of the cheap food system is a form of protest, a form of activism.

Rasch is optimistic about the future for small farmers. "More and more people are starting to say, 'There is some intrinsic value to buying from somebody I know and the kind of produce they're growing.'"

We need sustainable agriculture to be core to every progressive platform in Iowa. We need Prairie Progressive-style candidates who will fight for small, diversified farms, incentives for sustainable farming, more access to land, and carbon taxes on fossil-fuel intensive agriculture. We need to vote with our pocketbooks.

Practices that promote a healthy landscape, healthy ecosystems, and healthy produce are critical to address the biggest challenges facing society today, including climate change, water scarcity, food security, and inequality.

—Clarity Guerra is an Iowa City Climate Ambassador and certified food enthusiast.

A quiet wail of grief

The 2021 iteration of our race wars came from minority numbers closing in on numbers of Whites, panicking the right. Hostile Republicans are as frantic and desperate as plantation slavers were to hold the whip. Some modern right-wing desperados now want to exchange democracy for autocracy. The left wallows in worry, shame, and pain.

Enter Emmy-nominated *Underground Railroad*, a quiet wail of grief streaming on Amazon Prime by Barry Jenkins (*Moonlight*), adapting Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer-winning novel of the same name. *Underground* evokes so much discomfort that some don't watch past the first episode. Its beauty and layered storytelling operates on you like a fever dream, a chase nightmare through which one travels awake on a fairytale subterranean railway, banging and clanking north to waystations used by slaves to flee.

Jenkins's gumbo of events evokes Black felt experience during slavery and Jim Crow, illuminating the suffering and losses Blacks experienced and were/are still forced to witness: the aggrievement of one becomes a trauma shared by all (*Vulture*, 6/25/21).

The chased person who survives this sad meander is teenage Cora (Thuso Mbedu), who runs away from enslavement in Georgia, having witnessed an appalling lynching — a torture scene that literally stops viewers' streaming. That's too bad, as its ugliness is the worst in this tale. (To avoid losing viewers at the start, it could have been discussed here with a long flashback later.)

The importance to Cora, however, is that this lynching sparks her need to escape. Eyes downcast, her body

tilted in submission, she travels through Georgia, the Carolinas, Tennessee, and Indiana, during 10 episodes of grim White slights. She has moments of smiling, loving, and standing tall, but is never really free. Like a war refugee, she is burdened by a childhood stolen by violent memories of humiliations, harm to others, terrible losses, and ceaseless pursuit by a bounty-hunter, one Arnold Ridgeway (Joel Edgerton). Ridgeway is a stand-in for the perpetual aggrievement that Blacks endure.

An early episode is devoted to how Ridgeway came to chasing slaves. We meet him as a young man, son to a smithy, a kindly abolitionist who hired workers rather than enslaving them and told his son to try to see himself in others. His early life was no bastion of bigotry but Arnold Ridgeway failed to acquire a conscience. His father's rightness couldn't compete, when having killed a runaway, Arnold is paid handsomely; he has stumbled into his calling.

A metaphoric Alice or Gulliver, Cora and fellow escapee, Caesar, travel to South Carolina, alighting in a strange community that offers comfort, freedom, brightness. On closer look, however, the place begins to resemble a pretty plantation or concentration camp, with white bosses and "dark horrific" medical procedures that have resulted in no black births. Meanwhile, Ridgeway arrives. He catches Caesar but Cora escapes his clutches, crying and alone, heading into the unknown on the railroad.

In North Carolina Cora meets station agent Martin, who tells her that North Carolina has outlawed Black people. An abolitionist, he hides her in his attic. Martin's wife scolds: 'you just got us all killed.' Their community is a twisted combo of

cultish evangelical sects—an upcoming 'ceremony' features the murder of another runaway slave. Martin intones: "(What) savagery a man is capable of when he believes his cause to be just." Cora's North Carolina hide-out is found by Ridgeway; she is recaptured; Martin and his wife die. We are left with the punishment of those who object to racial animus but conform by keeping their heads down.

Ridgeway takes Cora to his family farm in Tennessee where his father ("I wish I had done more to shape the boy into a man") is dying. The slightly remorseful son gets drunk, describing the savagery of Caesar's murder to Cora; she grieves.

Royal, a free black man, unchains Cora and they escape onward to a wine-making farm in Indiana. There the product has eased the friction caused by the anomaly of Blacks prospering in White Indiana. But a White gang arrives, lays waste to the community, and Ridgeway turns up, at last meeting his end. Cora tells Royal that she is tired of running and grieving: "Make you wonder if there ain't no real places to escape to. Only places to run from." Her story ends in pastoral sunlight, if no particular joy, as she catches a wagon headed for St Louis and the unknown. Royal is dead, and she travels with a young black girl.

Black Americans still have little ease in sight, just wishful thinking that life may turn out less bad. It is depressing; Whites (like me) are depressing. One empathizes with Barry Jenkins as he describes weeping while filming Cora's story of endurance and hope. Still, soldier on through this journey of sadness; it gives heart and meaning to our oldest story.

—Lee Liberman is Senior Film and History Correspondent for *The Prairie Progressive*.

**The currency of kindness,
cont'd from Page 1**

been through a more debilitating series of events than those unleashed by “our complainant.”

I try not to be, but I am a damn wreck. Some of you are thinking, Well you should have mowed the lawn, moron. But it’s not that simple. It never is. And now, habitat will be macerated to some degree, however careful and caring our lawnsman is. He and I tromped through the yard the other evening, to go over our boundaries and our list of things we’ve agreed with the city we can leave ’til after our migrators migrate. “It’s gonna look different,” he said to me at one point. “I won’t lie to you.” The words keep me up at night.

What this has to do with America’s current barbarity is just that – the absence of kindness. One of our nursery favorites, as we discussed autumnal tree plantings in the newly shorn and stripped ‘back 40,’ said simply, “That was unloving. That was not kind.” I think of those words at night, too.

The lost coin of the currency of kindness is a treasure beyond calculation. Its absence leaves a hole in many a heart, in ways large and small, a million times a day. Despite our differences, disputes, weeds, and messes, we need to get it back.

—*Kim Painter is the Johnson County Recorder.*

Connect with Reform Alliance

Learn how we are changing supervised probation in Iowa. Be a part of the movement to improve Iowa’s probation and parole system. HF678 will make Iowa safer, reduce prison overcrowding, and save the state millions annually that can be reinvested to empower people to make a positive impact on their community after they’ve served their time. To get involved, visit us at www.reformalliance.com or on Facebook to connect and receive updates on our campaign.

—*Devin Mehaffey, devin@reformalliance.com*

“There are two spiritual dangers in not owning a farm. One is the danger of supposing that breakfast comes from the grocery, and the other that heat comes from the furnace.”

—*Aldo Leopold*

Correction

The previous issue of *The Prairie Progressive* listed several “picks for summer reading” including a new book by Candace Taylor. The correct title of her book is *Overground Railroad: The Green Book and the Roots of Black Travel in America*.



Keep swinging

I want to talk for a minute about another Hall of Famer, one by the name of Hank Aaron. Aaron's career began in the Negro American League when baseball was still segregated. It peaked 23 years later when he broke the beloved Babe Ruth's lifetime home run record, despite racism, intense pressure, and death threats that required constant security.

After entering the Baseball Hall of Fame, Aaron was asked to explain his success. He said, "My motto was always to keep swinging. Whether I was in a slump or feeling badly or having trouble off the field, the only thing to do was keep swinging." I think the great activists in the Johnson County Democrats Hall of Fame would agree with Aaron's motto.

- The Jo Co Board of Supervisors, afraid of transparency, didn't want their meetings televised. We kept swinging.
- When the Chair of the Central Committee wouldn't allow us to carry the Democratic Party banner in the first Pride parades, we kept swinging.
- When county officials used to be housed in the old courthouse, and an elected official said, regarding a county election, "there will never be an n-word in the courthouse," we kept swinging.
- When everyone thought state legislators had the votes to reinstate the death penalty in Iowa, we kept swinging.
- When County Supervisors said satellite voting stations and extra staff for absentee ballots were too expensive, we kept swinging.
- When state legislators refused to add sexual orientation to the Iowa civil rights code, we kept swinging.

In all of these battles, we kept swinging—and we won.

Many Johnson County Democrats have stepped to the plate and kept swinging over the years. This is my chance to publicly thank a few of those who inspired me to keep swinging too.

- The person I've been friends with the longest in Johnson Co. is Orville Townsend. We met at the old Quadrangle dorm, and he's been my mentor ever since. I always walk away from a conversation with Orville with new insights and perspectives. And Mrs. Townsend too!

In all of these battles,
we kept swinging,
and we won.

- Tom Slockett was Johnson County Auditor for an astonishing 36 years. No single person was more responsible for initiating and pushing for early voting and satellite polling stations, long before they became so popular in Johnson Co. and the state of Iowa. Tom's the guy who first introduced me to county politics.
- Dick Myers, more than anyone, taught me about politics at all levels of government. Slockett and Riley Grimes and I spent many a Sunday morning literally sitting at Dick's feet out at the Hawk-I Truck Stop, learning from the master.
- Former Co. Supervisor Carol Thompson was my boss at Johnson County Social Services for eight years when it was out on North Governor St. Carol taught me that there are a lot of rules, but rules are "just a starting point." You have to know them, so you can know how to bend them, to help someone in need.
- It was Jeff Cox who, as Chair of the County Central Committee, lured me into representing the Fighting

18th Precinct. I did that for 23 years, usually with my Precinct 18 partner in crime, Sarah Swisher. Jeff also got me involved in my first presidential caucus, working for Alan Cranston. And we co-edited the *Prairie Progressive* for 35 years.

- Working for Jesse Jackson in the 1988 caucus was my most exhilarating campaign experience. I have John Norris to thank for including me in many meetings and rides with the Reverend. I firmly believe that campaign plowed the ground that made Barack Obama possible twenty years later.
- Another exhilarating caucus experience was the Howard Dean campaign in 2004. Jeani Murray hired me, and we shared many ups and downs in a roller-coaster year. One of the downs was when I was driving Gov. Dean and Jeani to an event in Des Moines. AP reporter Mike Glover was also in the car. I took a wrong turn, and before we knew it, we wound up almost in Nebraska. Glover never let me forget it.
- I spent the last 14 years working with Dave Loeb sack and Rob Sueppel. A better pair of colleagues and bosses I could never hope to find. I'm proud to have been part of a team that kept a congressional seat in Democratic hands for 14 years!

I'll finish with a few words of advice, based on what I've learned from so many of you.

- Be kind to each other.
- Try not to hold grudges.
- Don't be afraid to bend the rules once in a while.
- If you find yourself heading for Nebraska, turn around and shake it off.
- And above all, keep swinging!

— *Dave Leshtz was inducted, along with David and Marian Coleman and Mel Stahmer, into the Johnson County Democrats Hall of Fame on July 9. These are excerpts from his acceptance speech.*

Fear of Trump continues

From the beginning of his ascendancy, and continuing to the present, I have been both fascinated and baffled by the many Republican politicians who appear to fear former president Donald Trump. It can also be infuriating at times. It seems clear that many Republicans will heavily criticize Trump in private, but support him in public. There have been numerous reports of this phenomenon from multiple sources.

I first wrote about this last spring (Iowa City Press-Citizen, March 21), but am revisiting it because in my judgment there have been significant developments since then.

One of the most concerning of these developments was the vote last May concerning a bipartisan commission to examine the events of January 6. The ouster of Liz Cheney is also certainly of concern. I believe that Fear of Trump, and fear about what Trump's supporters might do to those who disagree with them, dictated the action in both situations—and overrode doing the right thing.

In terms of the Cheney ouster, she stated in an interview on *This Week*, and as reported by *Forbes* on May 16, that “we now live in a country where members’ votes are affected because they’re worried about their security; they’re worried about threats on their lives.” Thus, not only do they fear Trump actively working against them, they fear for their safety as well.

The vote related to the creation of a bipartisan commission to examine the January 6 insurrection is a second situation in which the Fear of Trump dictated action for many in Congress, especially the Senate, which voted down the creation of

a commission. Representative Jason Crow, when commenting on the Fear of Trump as it related to the bill to create a commission, stated that “... the impact of fear, the fear of Donald Trump...is overriding patriotism, that desire to do what’s necessary for the good of the country, and it’s, frankly, very depressing.” (*The Hill*, May 30, 2021)

What I have repeatedly thought about is the question of exactly what it is that these Republicans fear. The obvious answer is they are afraid of being voted out of office, or from winning office initially. However, as I have stated before and continue to ponder – what about THAT creates so much fear? Is losing an election that horrific? Horrific enough to severely compromise one’s values, and lose any sense of a moral compass? Apparently for some, sadly, that is the case. And as stated above, some also fear—incredibly to me—for their safety.

It also seems to that this phenomenon goes far beyond the two examples cited above. Speaking specifically of the vote recount in Arizona, and the stance taken by some Republicans in that state, Greg Sargent stated that “It is a deliberate action plainly undertaken to manufacture fake evidence for the affirmative purpose of further undermining faith in our electoral process” (*Washington Post*, May 10, 2021). Whatever it is, it is of great concern. To me, undergirding it all—once again – is the Fear of Trump, which creates an inability to muster moral courage. This is frustrating and discouraging. It is also scary. Will the continuing Fear of Trump ultimately lead to an undermining of our democracy? Time will tell.

Trump appears, based on the public behavior I have observed,

to possess a number of traits that lend themselves to invoking fear in others. Specifically, he is a critical person—quick to punish others, and to threaten others; he is egocentric and narcissistic; he craves attention; he gaslights; he is dictatorial; he will repeat lies ad-nauseum; and he creates both explicitly and implicitly a sense in some others that there is reason to fear him.

But congresspeople fearing him? Governors fearing him enough to stand down on issues of personal principle? Fearing him enough to even speak against COVID vaccinations? I will never understand this.

Trump’s psychological traits stand in sharp contrast to President Biden’s—a man who often praises and supports others; has little ego; is not narcissistic; is at ease with people; works to build consensus; is a gentle man; and is a deeply feeling person who knows what it means to experience loss, which in my experience often leads to increased empathy. In short, it is hard to imagine very many people being afraid of President Biden.

So it will always confound me that so many Republican politicians fear Donald Trump—and seem to have compromised their values. I do hold out some hope that things will change, and that Fear of Trump will not continue to be such a powerful force. I fervently hope that some of these Republicans will show not just private courage—but public courage, too.

—John Westefeld is a Board-Certified Psychologist who lives in Iowa City.

Letter to the editor

I love *The Prairie Progressive* because the writers are consistently excellent and the editing is superlative. I love it because it confirms that there are informed and committed folks all over who create authority to improve our society. I love it because it arrives in my mailbox and has art and humor and is succinct. I love it because it happens in Iowa and that is reassuring.

—Ilana Platt, Chicago, IL

“The task of a writer is not to solve the problem but to state the problem correctly.”

—Anton Chekhov



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August 1, 1956

Salk polio vaccine distributed

August 9, 1936

Jesse Owens won 4th Gold Medal in Berlin Olympics

August 19

Iowa City Federation of Labor Candidates Academy, Center for Worker Justice

August 20, 1996

Congress raised minimum wage to \$5.15

August 22, 1971

George Jackson killed at San Quentin

August 28

Latino Fest, Iowa City

September 3, 1916

Railroad workers won 8-hour day

September 5

Pride Fest, Coralville

September 13, 1971

Attica prison massacre

September 13, 2001

Cong. Barbara Lee cast lone “No” vote giving Pres. Bush authority for military response to 9/11 terrorist attack

September 16, 1976

Congress passed Hyde amendment banning federal funds for abortions

September 25, 1981

Sandra Day O’Connor became first woman on Supreme Court

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