

I Was Wrong

By Peter Wright

Way back in 2016, I made a huge mistake. It's taken me nearly 35 years to admit it publicly, but here it is: I was wrong.

Throughout that period, I explained my error by saying that the times were confusing, even bizarre. On the one hand, the previous year, 2015, had been the hottest on record; it had concluded in December with 195 nations agreeing in Paris that climate change was real and that humans were the primary cause. On the other hand, sixteen Republican candidates for President were denying that climate change existed or that human activity had anything to do with it. Thankfully, into this mess stepped Lake Oswego Sustainability Network (LOSN) with a plan: "write a story, from sometime around 2050, about what action Lake Oswegans of today took to prevent the worst effects of a changing climate, and create a better world in the bargain."

I jumped right in. I was especially intrigued by the phrase "and create a better world in the bargain" because years of observation told me that environmental harm was in many ways like gun violence. In both cases a person uses an instrument designed to cause harm (a gun, a bulldozer) to do just that, to kill part of the living system (a person, a meadow). In both cases, the person causing the harm believes that what he does is good.

With that in mind, I wrote a 'memoir' from the perspective of a young man whose plan to shoot a lecturer was foiled because Lake Oswegans had learned to identify the conditions, behaviors and attitudes that led to gun violence. By 2050, Lake Oswego was a vibrant, safe town, and a model of social and environmental health worldwide.

LOSN rejected the story because it contained uncouth language, which of course it did since I'd written it from the perspective of the deranged shooter.

Undeterred, I composed a second 'memoir', this time replacing horror with humor. I wrote from the perspective of a man who had embraced every nonsensical "solution" to climate change, solutions that sounded good, but actually did nothing to change the underlying problem. Electric cars, for example, touted as a technological fix to the dramatic increase in carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, would have a positive impact only if enough people sold their gas-guzzlers and bought them. More importantly, they'd have a positive effect only if the number of people driving cars decreased. The electric car did reduce carbon dioxide emissions, but it did nothing to solve the overarching problem, which was the increasing number of people who owned and drove cars.

In my story I tried to deal with population growth humorously by paraphrasing a solution proposed by a community leader in the '80s. "You have no faith in humanity," he said to me. "If you had faith in humanity, you'd know that people are good at solving problems. The more people who work on a problem, the sooner the problem will be solved. Therefore, the way to solve the problem of overpopulation is to have more babies." Try as I might, I couldn't make that any funnier than it already was . . . nor any more tragic.

Once again, LOSN rejected my submission, saying, "The story still doesn't fit the intention of what we are trying to do which is to take a challenging issue like climate change and present

inspiring, positive scenarios of how our community, Lake Oswego, can deal with it in a way that would make us all proud.”

I was downhearted. Depressed. The atmosphere was warming, seas were rising and the environment was deteriorating. LOSN, I concluded, didn't want to talk about real solutions, but only wanted feel-good stories. I shut the whole project out of my mind and went back to picking up Styrofoam along the Willamette and growing vegetables.

Then I read the LOSN stories that others had submitted, and realized I was dead-wrong. The LOSN writing project was a catalyst for real change. In fact, I can see now (34 years later) that it saved Lake Oswego. And it has started to save the world. The stories did mention some technological “fixes”, but more importantly, they suggested that the real solution to climate change was a change in attitude, and from that a change in behavior. We couldn't keep doing the same old things and expect different outcomes. All of which meant that we had to change the underlying culture, because our culture predisposed us to repeat the same harmful behaviors that had gotten us into our environmental mess.

A couple lines in Craig Stephens' submission “Black Swan Effect” hinted at a direction:

“ . . . away from endless strife.

The ‘Black Swan’ event, lightning bolt epiphany,
Forced women-led united nations to agree . . . “

“Endless strife”? What could he mean but war? Three words in the next stanza told me his solution to war: “women-led nations.” I read those words and instantly had my own epiphany. For thousands of years, men-led nations were either in conflict with one another, recovering from conflict or preparing for conflict. Men-led groups stirred up fights everywhere: ISIS, Boko Haram, White Supremacists, Patriots and even the men in Congress. Men-led societies had been at war with Nature since the very beginning, hacking her down, pushing her back, shooting her endangered species for tusks and horns and paving her grasslands. It was suddenly very clear to me that a male-led society could never be peaceful and sustainable.

The LOSN project told me that the societal shift had already begun. Historically, we had relied on material objects, on things to solve our problems (fortifications, houses and weapons for protection; printing presses and computers for communication, etc.). We could not rely on things to solve environmental problems because things caused environmental problems. Making things caused pollution, using things caused pollution, and disposing of things caused pollution. In fact, they were the sources of all pollution, including climate change. Therefore, it made no sense to try to reverse climate change by making more things, no matter how green those things were.

The solution lay not in changing things but in changing behaviors.

I recalled a study of a troop of Macaque monkeys that had been moved onto an island off the coast of Japan for their protection. Since the island didn't produce enough food, the Japanese delivered rice to the beach. As the monkeys got to the bottom of the pile, sand mixed with the rice, and eating damaged their teeth. Imo, a female, figured out that if she went to the stream with a handful of rice and sand and then opened her hands, the sand fell to the bottom faster than

the rice. She could scoop up the rice and feed it safely to her young. Other females watched and copied her. Then the young began doing it for themselves. The last to learn were the older males.

Through the LOSN writing project, women realized they could not rely on men, especially the older males who occupied most positions of power in business and politics, to change fast enough to save the planet. Women had to do it. It was daunting; they had limited options. One option was, of course, to do nothing, in which case the male-dominated society would do what it had always done. The environment would continue to worsen and we'd end up in a Mad Max fight for scarce resources. Another option was to join with men and enact harsh laws that punished excessive production and excessive use of things. Unfortunately, such a solution kept the male-dominated hierarchies in power, which meant that, ultimately, the world was saved not through free choice but through coercion. Not that the male-dominated hierarchies were wrong; they were just obsolete. The last option was to make personal choices that would change the balance of power. Women, whose biological role had always been the creation and sustenance of life, could set the standards in all social, economic and political realms. Women could change the culture. Women could save the world.

How?

It wasn't for me to say, even if I knew. Women don't want a man telling them what to do. The path away from an object-oriented, male-dominated society toward a female-oriented, life-centered society had to come women. I went back to reducing my impact by carrying my groceries from the store and shutting down my computer at night. As you can see by looking around, the women of Lake Oswego figured out how to peacefully and effectively extricate our city from a culture oriented to things. We now live in crime-free, sustainable Lake Oswego, and the rest of the world has noticed. I'm so glad that my first two stories were rejected by LOSN.

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