
Guest Column: Telling the truth about the way we live now

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Evonne lives in a fire lookout in Oregon, and since I meet with these graduate students on Zoom, we've all seen snippets of her life, including the dizzying moments when she leaps up to scan for fires while holding her tablet.

At these moments, we're treated to a rollercoaster tumble of trees and sky before she settles back down, unless, of course, her tablet overheats, in which case we are put into her fridge, and we get the view from there. Boring classes, these are not.

Since this is a master's program in Nature Writing, there are people Zooming in from the backs of vans and mountainsides, though plenty Zoom from homes in suburbs or cities too, and they hail from everywhere from California to Texas to Nebraska to Idaho.

They have one thing in common, though: Given their self-identification as nature writers, on day one there is a shared emotional foundation, since they're more aware than most about the devastating change they are

encountering — megafires, decimated butterfly numbers, aquifers depleted for bottled water, extreme heat, drought, and flooding, to name just a few of the topics they've covered this past semester.

Climate chaos is no stranger to anyone who signs up for such a program, and so they arrive with the grief, anger, moral injury and vulnerability appropriate to our times. Sometimes referred to as GenDread, many are also at the age when they're faced with climate-related decisions that have long-term consequences too — whether or not to have children, for example. Others worry about this for their children or grandchildren.

In this way, Evonne has come to embody the cohort in my mind, perhaps because she is literally looking for evidence of environmental disaster as we discuss environmental disaster and how best to respond to it via writing. Not all fires are bad, of course, but megafires could be, and when her lookout was evacuated this past summer, Evonne called to talk.

That's when I felt the problem more deeply than ever: How do I teach through such startling climate disruption? How do we focus not on loss — though bearing witness is important too — but on kindling energy and options to envision a better world-to-come? How do prospective survivors get made, those who are honest enough to imagine and face the worst, and, more importantly, follow up with action and oomph?

That is, in the end, what they bring me. Their very energy. And my only hope is that I am able to teach some specifics, such as the importance of solutions-based journalism, the evolution of nature writing, advocacy writing and lyrical writing, the techniques of fiction and nonfiction and poetry. And above all else, the power of a well-told story.

The truest thing I can say, though, is this: We've been told some bad stories.

Untruths and bald-faced lies about how to live on Planet Earth, perhaps even by nature writers. We're in a mess and the answer is telling new stories. Brave stories. Complex stories that embrace our problematic history of unlocking fossil fuels, or in silencing voices, or in our communication with and about land. We need stories that fashion new narratives about ecological wisdom for our future.

These students are capable of telling them. We all are. Likely, it starts with being better listeners. In the case of fire, for example, we need to deep-listen to scientists, not just for the sound bites, but for the nuance; also, we need to critically consider which stories about our relationship to fire aren't working.

Writing is an act of co-creation — we write; that story leaps back and creates some new awareness; we write again. We imagine what we have to lose, so we know what we can save. This is how cultures evolve. How humans grow up. We don't need to capitulate to a doomsday future; we can try to write our way toward climate justice and wisdom.

That is what teaching Evonne and everyone she stands for has taught me. We need to examine our old stories, listen well and deeply, and then begin to write new narratives. We need to help our new storytellers, even if it means being put in the fridge.

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