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OPINION

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OP-ED

Why Not To Say 'It's Just A Dog'

By MERLIN CHOWKWANYUN

My dog died the day after Christmas in 2016. He was 17, a Westie-something, cotton-white and fluffy, a small walking cloud but well-groomed. His name was Homer: after the incompetent nuclear power plant manager from "The Simpsons."

The name fit his goofy personality. Despite his modest size, Homer always seemed under the impression he was much bigger. He'd bark at strangers, but then run in the other direction the moment they moved closer to him. Homer loved to insert himself into conversations. And any time he saw a group of three or more people in a bunch, he'd make himself a part of the group, squeezing in between a couple of people's legs, as if he had something essential to hear and to contribute as well.

Since Dec. 26, 2016, memories like this flash through my head constantly. That morning, my mom woke me up and told me blankly, "Homer is dying." Her eyes were watery and a little red. I felt my pulse rocket upward as I followed her out. Homer was half-conscious, still trying to shake off what looked like a morning seizure.

For the first 30 minutes, I was in denial. I told my mom that I'd seen him shake from time to time before, and this was nothing more than that. But denial gave way to reality. Homer's eyes wouldn't open much, no matter how much we gently poked at him. And human tears have a way of telling you the truth about what you really know but don't want to acknowledge.

Reality felt like a cement block crashing into my head. Homer hadn't eaten regularly for three weeks. He'd barely wanted to take walks. I'd been keeping myself afloat by saying it was just a stomach bug of some sort and he'd be getting over it soon.

We took Homer to the vet. My mom sat in the passenger seat, cradling him in a scarf. En route, I noticed he'd opened his eyes in full, looking like he was still figuring out what was going on. They were his trademark black little marbles, shiny, wide and innocent. Maybe it wasn't his time after all.

I clung to that shard of hope when we got to the vet and waited in the exam room. For a few minutes, Homer was his old self. He got up on the floor a few times and walked around. He did his trademark rapid doggy shake and bake, which helped get water or debris off his body. Except now we were in a spotless exam room, and reality again smacked me hard.

I seized on the essential phrases coming out of my vet's mouth: "poor quality of life," "in pain," "organ failure."

We were told that we could have as long as we needed with him before the procedure started. All of us — Mom, my sister, myself — got down on the floor. We were scrunched together in a circle and took turns petting him. He was calmer than any of us three, eyes starting to close again. I was a much bigger mess. Every time I tried to do a sustained tummy rub or scratch a little under his chin, the tears and the wails came out.

When it was time for Homer to go down the hall to get his IV inserted, I darted to the parking lot. An hour later, my mom and my sister finally came out. They said they had stayed with Homer a bit after he had passed, silently sharing a final quiet moment with him.

We drove home and barely said a word.

My day job is in academia. I teach and research about big societal ills, from growing inequality to the corrosive effects of racism. Seen against all that, grieving over a dog seems like an indulgence. "He's just a dog," as so many non-pet owners have said to me over the years.

Yeah. True enough, I guess. But then why do I and so many dog and pet owners like me grieve over the Homers of the world the way we do? Why do we see them as our best friends, as family members whom we love as much and no less than our closest human companions?

Homer was my refuge: my reminder that however much pettiness, betrayal or bad faith that I — or people around me — might exhibit from time to time, there is such a thing as basic goodness. That's how I accept the depth of my feelings for my deceased dog. He spent so much time looking after me — without even knowing it — that I returned the favor, even after he passed.

That evening, I asked my mom: "Did he look scared right before he was put down?"

"No," she assured me. "He was very peaceful and calm. He just closed his eyes."

Good dog.

Merlin Chowkwanyun is a Robert Wood Johnson Health & Society Scholar at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He wrote this for The Washington Post.

LETTERS

An Unsuitable GOP Speaker

A confederation of Republican town committees invited Michelle Malkin to address them on Thursday in Haddam. Their choice of speaker tells us that our local Republican Party is fully on board with the Trump administration's message of hate.

Just one example of Malkin's extreme and callous views: Malkin claims that the internment of women, men and children of Japanese descent during World War II was vindicated by reports that Japan tried to recruit agents among people of Japanese origin living in the U.S. Historians have debunked her account, but even if it were correct, it would not justify incarcerating an entire group on the basis of their ethnicity. That is, by definition, a racist policy.

After 9/11, President Bush made it clear that America did not see Muslims or the Islamic faith as our enemy. That was a bright spot in his administration — one I particularly appreciated as the child of a father who, as an American teenager, was sent with his family to an internment camp. From there, he volunteered for the U.S. Army and was decorated for valor.

I am sorry to learn that local Republicans think Malkin represents what their party stands for.

Cathy Iino, Killingworth

The writer is the first selectman of Killingworth and a Democrat.

Lincoln's Wisdom

Dick Allen's recent call to action [Insight, July 16, "Moderates Arise! A Manifesto"] struck a resonant chord in me.

I, too, wish we could find a way toward moderate, reasonable, cooperative, moral governance. In regard to this, I have gone back to the speeches of President Lincoln. He faced an America being torn apart by entrenched factions. I think Lincoln gave us the keys to going forward.

Referring to the loss of the founding fathers of American democracy, he said: "They were the pillars of the temple of liberty, and now that they have crumbled away, that temple must fall unless we, their descendants, supply their places with other pillars, hewn from the solid quarry of sober reason. Passion has helped us, but can do so no more. It will in [the] future be our enemy. Reason — cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason — must furnish all the materials for our future support and defense."

Lincoln saw how to defend a country growing older and more complex. He exemplified clear-eyed thinking, keen analysis and sound moral reasoning. It saved the Union in its crisis. We need this approach in our own day, more than ever.

Marilyn Johnston, Bloomfield

Health Care Is Broken

It is not Obamacare that is broken. It is the health care system that is broken.

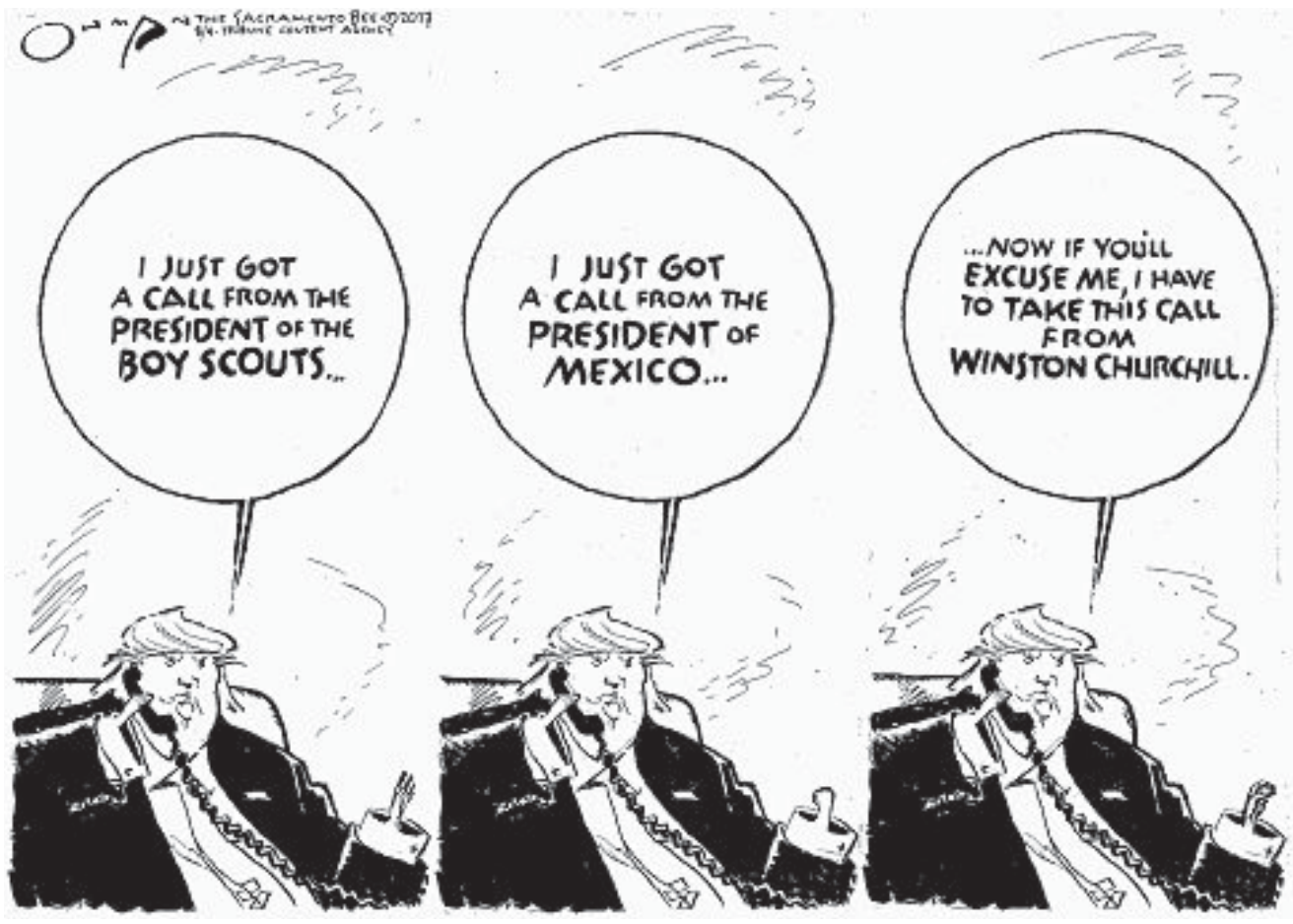
Aetna CEO Mark Bertolini knows. Not only is Aetna moving its headquarters to New York City, with a generous tax package from the state and the city, after having been in Hartford for more than 150 years, but the corporation continues to be exceedingly profitable.

As President Trump says, health care is complicated. But it doesn't have to be so complicated. It is complicated because there are so many different players involved, particularly large insurance and pharmaceutical companies, which need to make a profit on health care.

The large number of individuals and families who have benefited from Obamacare and who fear its demise could be reassured about continued coverage if we had a single-payer health care system in this country. We need to compare our health care system with those in other countries — comparing both the costs and quality of health care — to clearly see the benefits of a different way of doing health care business.

As we continue to worry about providing health care for all, we need to be honest about who are the winners and losers in this debate.

Marcia Bok, Hartford



OP-ED

Ban Campus Dorms; They Worsen Inequality

By CONOR FRIEDERSDORF

My alma mater, Pomona College, has long housed 99 percent of its students on campus. I enjoyed that culture. But now I wonder if that model is bad for the country.

I wonder if it should be tweaked or even abandoned in favor of an alternative that exposes overachievers to more people unlike themselves.

Don't worry: The typical American college student would not be affected. At public four-year institutions, just under a quarter of students live on campus. Just 1 percent of community college students live in dorms. But America's ruling elites would face a profound change. The percentage of students in university-affiliated housing is 99 percent at Harvard, 93 percent at Stanford and 84 percent at Yale.

Such unapologetically elitist institutions operate on the premise that it is proper to identify gifted young people with leadership potential; to separate them out from their peers; and to cluster them in an exclusive, member-only settings for four years of intense learning.

That approach has some validity. When bright young people study math, physics, philosophy and other subjects among minds of similar caliber, they learn at a similar pace and help one another to achieve greater mastery. Their greater mastery is, in turn, good for society.

But it is much harder to defend a separatist approach to their lives outside of the classroom —especially as elite institutions purport to produce not just future scholars, but future leaders.

Students would learn more outside the classroom if exposed to young people from a greater variety of backgrounds than they'd typically find at a top-tier college. And the future leaders among them might better serve the public, or the private sector workers beneath them, if they spent more of their formative years with generational peers who, for whatever reason, did not want to or could not attend a fancy university — the vast majority of Americans.

In the United States, the ideological gap between more and less educated adults is widening.

A majority of Republicans now say that higher education has a negative effect on the country. Voters have lost faith in elites of all kinds. And that's true at least in part because elites unthinkingly perpetuate their own tribe's interests — without ever having to meet the people harmed — through trade policy or restrictive urban planning or professional licensing laws that disproportionately burden the working class.

It therefore seems perverse to maintain tax-exempt, institutionalized programs of extreme residential cloistering where cognitive elites form social bonds exclusively with one another.

How would the world be different if the next startup billionaire from Stanford formed friendships in college with elder care workers, plumbers and truckers in addition to doctors, lawyers and consultants?

These arrangements are unlikely to occur naturally even off-campus. (Our residential housing market is highly segregated by class and race.) They could, however, happen at institutions already dedicated to shaping leaders.

Imagine a selective college that used part of its hefty endowment to partner with nearby institutions on a brand-new kind of dorm. Half its residents would come from the college itself. The other half would be drawn from vocational schools, community colleges and technical training programs — people of the same age cohort, all working toward a degree or certificate, though the particulars of their circumstances would vary depending on the particular city or town.

They'd go off to their respective classes by day and return in the evening to programming and activities that encouraged them to interact.

Graduates of selective institutions would balk at such a change. They have fond memories of living on campuses composed of people with very similar academic profiles, some of whom went on to be close friends. Consumerist students tend to prefer what is comfortable to what will help them learn or serve best.

Finally, selective colleges recognize that they appeal to families in part because they bring together up-and-coming young people in a world where who you know matters tremendously.

But maybe there's a university out there that's ready to put its narrow interests aside, and build the E Pluribus Dorm before it's too late.

Conor Friedersdorf is a contributing writer to the Los Angeles Times' opinion section, where this first appeared. It was edited for length.