
THE PRAIRIE PROGRESSIVE



a newsletter for Iowa's Democratic Left

June 2023

The people made a difference

Let's be honest: reading the news which streamed out of Iowa's capitol from January to April this year was an exercise in self-abuse. There's no need to recite the litany of pain delivered by Republican legislators to public education, workers, our environment and LGBTQ+ folks – each piece of legislation is etched into our brains and bodies like a bad tattoo we'll never be able to completely get rid of.

Even more discouraging, it's hard to look forward to things getting better when there are no logical reasons to believe they will, at least in the short-term. Which is why two weeks in Black Hawk County this spring were so important, for me, for our community, and for all of us who call Iowa home.

Annual 'Pride Month' designations are usually not a big deal for most urban areas, even in Iowa. But the May city council meeting in Cedar Falls turned out to be anything but usual.

A little background: even though Cedar Falls is home to one of Iowa's three state universities, its city council has historically leaned conservative. They've always treated UNI students the way a parent treats unruly nieces or nephews who overstay a visit: they grudgingly put up with the tikes, but would rather not. CF city council members love to give sweetheart deals to developers but would rather not have to deal with 'social issues.'

Nonetheless, the typical 'Pride Month' proclamation was on the May 1 city

council agenda and was cruising toward passage, until a couple days prior to the meeting. Then, Mayor Rob Brown blindsided everyone by sending a memo to the city council citing scriptures against gay marriage and stating that "my Christian beliefs would require that I not sign or otherwise take part in this proclamation." The proclamation included no language about gay marriage.

News spread fast throughout the community, and on the night of May 1—an evening when most of the world was celebrating workers—the CF city council found themselves confronted by a mass of average community folks turned human rights activists. Dozens of straight, gay, & trans residents showed up... and spoke out. Loudly. Passionately. For hours. All directed toward a council body which hates controversy. And *the people* made a difference.

By the end of the meeting Mayor Brown apparently had a new understanding of his Christian beliefs, because he shared that he'd changed his mind, that the community had spoken, and he was listening. The CF city council passed the proclamation, and he signed it.

Next door over in Waterloo, back in February, City Councilman Jon Grieder introduced a city ordinance which would ban Conversion Therapy within Waterloo's city limits. Waterloo currently boasts the most progressive city council membership in its history, and minorities make up a majority of the council. They knew that Conversion Therapy is a brutal, abusive 'treatment' which has been

discontinued and denounced by every mainstream medical organization in the U.S. The first reading of the ordinance passed easily 6-1.

However, news of the vote activated the conservative religious community, and in the following days they bombarded council members with phone calls and emails. Two weeks later, council members voted to delay the 2nd reading of the ordinance. Legal questions were raised. The future of the ordinance was in doubt.

After a work session – and after making sure the Iowa legislature had already adjourned for the year – a highly publicized city council meeting took place on May 15. City council chambers were packed, with residents spilling out into the hallway. Where previous meetings had featured primarily conservative members of the public speaking out, on this night progressives of every age, race and background again showed up...and spoke out. Residents talked passionately about their children who had left the state due to harassment, and shared personal stories of hateful behavior directed toward them and their friends. The public comment period went on for almost two hours.

Ultimately, the revised ordinance was watered down a bit to maintain strong council support and pass legal muster. But on this night, Waterloo city council members let it be known Conversion Therapy is not welcome in my hometown. The vote for the ordinance

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April 19, 1995: Bits and pieces

I made friends in high school, more after Sue and I started dating. Of course, I lost most of them after we split up. They took sides. She won. I even went to my ten-year class reunions, until I didn't. Too many times I was asked "How ya doing, Harry? What ya up to now?" and when I told them that I was a taxi driver you could see their eyes glaze over. But there were still some friends who kept in touch with me because I was a taxi driver. They would go out of their way to call me when they needed a lift. And we would talk about the old days or their current lives, their jobs and children. Their lives progressed. I was merely an audience for them, like a bartender. In time I became a multi-generational bartender. One of my fares was actually the daughter of Natalie Kimmel, a good friend of Sue's, and I would sometimes get bits and pieces of Sue's life from the daughter. Bits and pieces, but I could tell that she was not passing along anything really important about Sue's life. Just bits and pieces she had heard from Natalie. One morning, the daughter had had car trouble and needed a quick lift to her job in the Murrah Building, a few blocks away from the Centre. She was very happy that morning, telling me the big news... she was pregnant. It was April 19, 1995. Bits and pieces, two hours after I dropped her off, she and her baby were bits and pieces.

That night was the first time I heard Harry Ducharme on the radio. After I heard the news about the Murrah that morning, I had just kept driving around town, ignoring calls for fares, wishing I knew how to get in touch with Sue because I wanted to be the one who told her about Natalie's daughter, but it was hopeless. I was sure that Sue saw the news like America saw the news, on television.

She didn't need me. Day into night, I kept circling. I'm not sure, but I must have passed the Centre a hundred times as I tried to get close to the Murrah. But the entire block was yellow-taped off and shattered glass was all over the nearest streets. Every building close to the Murrah had its windows gouged out.

I turned on the radio.

"Helluva day for me to start this job, my friends. Death and destruction and terror. But I think I can find some lines to put it all in perspective. Not my lines. I'm not that talented. But this has all happened before. Trust me."

Who was this guy? And how could he just... dismiss... all those people? Natalie's daughter, her baby, everybody else.

"My name is Harry Forster Ducharme."

He was named Harry, just like me? Was that the moment I felt a chill in the taxi? My body temperature seemed to drop as I listened to that mesmerizing voice. More than that, I had the feeling that Harry Ducharme was talking directly to me, that I was the only person listening to him that night. I could hear phones ringing in the background. So, I must have been wrong. Others were tuned in, trying to make a connection.

"Not tonight, folks, no time for chatter. Tonight is for grief and poetry. I'll do all the talking. This show is my dime. Until I get canned again. I coulda been a contender, but here I am talking to you, and you only."

He was talking to me.

The phones stopped ringing in the background. "Now it's just me and you again. So, where was I? Where are you? You think today was senseless, and brutal, and tragic. You're sad and angry. But today is not unique. You need

distance. From a distance, things are clearer. Everything that happened today will happen again. Death will happen again. Love will happen again. Life will happen again. Where do you want me to start? Dylan Thomas? Go find his poem 'A Refusal to Mourn the Death, by Fire, of a Child in London.' Pay attention to that last line. 'After the first death'... see, that's the key. There was always a first death, before you were conceived in the mind of God or your mother's womb. 'There is no other.' Nobody really died today. They are still among us."

Ducharme was right. Two years later, I started seeing ghosts.

—Larry Baker, *self-appointed Prose Laureate of Iowa, lives and writes in Iowa City. His latest novel, from which this excerpt comes, is Harry and Sue.*

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was 6-1, and after that the rules were immediately suspended, and the 2nd and 3rd votes were also held. Another win for Black Hawk County.

Reading each day about the latest piece of right-wing legislation dreamed up and enacted by the Trump-DeSantis-Reynolds troika is enough to discourage even the most hardened and cynical activist. Progressive wins seem few and far apart. All of which makes the actions of these two city councils—and the activism which made it all possible—so heartening. It brings to mind another word which lately has been hard to come by in progressive circles: hope.

—Dennis Harbaugh lives in Waterloo and is incoming president of Cedar Valley Unitarian Universalists.

Working with common purpose

In 2017, Iowa Republicans rewrote our public sector collective bargaining law, Chapter 20, dramatically taking away the rights of Iowa public sector workers to bargain a contract. However, there are certain statutory rights Iowa Republicans did not touch. Perhaps most importantly, public employees maintain the right to engage in concerted activities for mutual aid or protection.

That right means that one or more employees must take some tangible actions for their conduct to be protected. Employees confiding, griping, or warning each other about workplace problems are not enough. Several years ago, the College Community School District terminated a teacher who provided wrap-around care for elementary students. The judge accurately determined that she was fired for having text message conversations with a co-worker on her own time, on her own phone. In her text messages, the teacher said things like, “do not trust [administrator] Kathy, she is a backstabber.” “[Administrator] Kylee plays favorites.” The co-worker with whom the teacher had been having these text exchanges ratted her out to management. Two days later the teacher was fired.

The judge determined that under Chapter 20 a public employer has the right to fire employees for conversations between co-workers, on their own time, on their own devices, regarding complaints or concerns about work. These conversations may have been protected in the private sector, under the National Labor Relations Act, but they are not protected under Iowa law. To be protected under Iowa law, the co-workers must have

contemplated taking some type of group action. Simply complaining or warning each other was not enough.

Fast forward to 2021. The President of the Board of Regents announced a policy prohibiting any requirements of masking at any state university. This caused quite a stir. At the University of Northern Iowa, one veteran biology professor felt very concerned—as a biologist—that a lack of masking made classrooms unsafe for himself, his peers, and his students. On the other hand, he had a lab course to teach and believed it would shortchange his students to even attempt to teach that class online rather than in person.

The professor had conversations with numerous colleagues, confiding that he was contemplating creating his own masking requirement for his class. After discussion and contemplation, the professor announced to his students that they would be required to wear masks in spite of the Regents’ policy. He then told his colleagues what he had done and suggested they consider doing the same thing. To enforce his classroom policy, the professor advised students that if they did not comply on a particular day, they may lose points. Everyone complied, and it was never an issue.

UNI became rather upset with the professor. They took his class from him and suspended him from teaching—though later tacitly acknowledging that they did indeed need his expertise to conduct the class. UNI disciplined the professor. The professor argued that he was exercising his Chapter 20 rights to engage in concerted activities for mutual aid and protection: namely, his health and the health of his colleagues.

Here’s the thing: the judge found that the professor’s actions were largely protected. He had the right to create this policy for his classroom, and his classroom policy could override the anti-masking fiat plopped one day on the Board of Regents website. However, the judge found the professor lost protection by his enforcement mechanism—the potential impact to student grades. Up to the point of saying there could be an impact on student grades, though, the professor was within his rights to ignore the Regents’ policy.

So—in the right situations—there can be avenues for employees, acting together, to override public employer policies. There could be special education teachers with concerns for their own and their colleagues’ health who believe a school district policy puts them at risk and collectively choose a better way to do the work; that could be protected. There could be county road crew employees who believe the supervisor’s directives expose them to too much risk of injury and find a different way of getting the job done; that could be protected.

Creative, collaborative public employees willing to work with common purpose against dumb management decisions still may have some rights in the State of Iowa.

—Nate Willems practices labor law in Cedar Rapids.

What if we just unionized?

When my coworkers and I first started to approach the subject of unionizing, it was always in a throwaway comment after a rough day—“what if we just unionized?” we would say to each other, laughingly, because we didn’t think we’d ever be able to do it. Fighting for a workplace that worked for us seemed impossible. We didn’t think we’d be able to win in a fight against a multinational corporation like Starbucks.

Starbucks likes to refer to its employees as “partners” in an attempt to bridge the gap between the corporate world of Starbucks and the day-to-day operations that are carried out by those on the floors in the stores. Starbucks claims we’re all “partners in shared success.” This shared success conveniently allows Starbucks’s corporate world to enjoy an ever-growing profit while measly raises are awarded to partners every now and then.

While partner wages stay mostly stagnant, the prices for Starbucks products continuously increase. Recently, we’ve seen prices on some popular drinks raised every fiscal quarter. This means customers are told to shell out more money for the same amount of product while partners are still making the same wage.

One must wonder how long Starbucks can keep this game up for. Recently, the Starbucks mobile app has experienced a litany of glitches that result in customers placing orders and having money taken from their account – but stores don’t receive the orders. Or customers report an increased amount of downtime for the app. Quality control at Starbucks seems to be lacking too. Many partners

have reported increasing amounts of damaged or missing products being delivered to stores. With the ever-increasing prices, you would think that Starbucks would be able to handle these issues in a timely fashion. But partners have no idea where this growing profit is going—though we can guess that some of it is being used to fund Starbucks’s extensive union-busting campaign.

Starbucks is no stranger to union-busting tactics such as firing partners who are union organizers or who are suspected of being union organizers, reducing hours for unionizing partners, withholding benefits from unionizing stores, closing unionized stores, and holding captive audience meetings. Starbucks has been taken to court many times for these actions and judges have ordered Starbucks to cease all union-busting activity. Starbucks has chosen instead to continue with its scorched earth campaign, shelling out obscene amounts of money to lawyers and union-busting firms to snuff out the growing union drive across the country.

Despite witnessing the gross amount of union-busting Starbucks is committed to, partners at the Starbucks on the corner of Burlington and Clinton in Iowa City finally decided that enough was enough. And for the first time in my life, I got to feel like I was taking my future into my own hands while our organizing committee made plans to approach partners about unionization. As many other organizers know, it’s not an easy task to cut through the constant anti-union propaganda that seeps into every corner of this country’s media. But one of the best parts about Starbucks – one thing that keeps many partners hanging on even after

years of corporate abuse – is that to do the job, you must work well with your fellow partners. You get along, you come to care about each other, and eventually you realize that these people that you know and love deserve much better than what they’re getting.

On March 27th, 2023, we filed for an election to unionize with well over 70% of our partners pledging to vote yes. In the weeks that followed, we received an outstanding amount of encouragement and support from some pretty lovely Iowans. The sense of community we suddenly found kept us focused on our goal. Starbucks, with all its might and money, couldn’t come close to snuffing out our desire for a workplace that worked for us.

On May 11th 2023, we won our union election with a unanimous vote of 25-0. Not only are we the first unionized store in the state of Iowa, but we also hold the record for the largest unanimous vote in Starbucks Workers United history (so far). What was once a distant pipe dream quickly became a reality for us. Now, my coworkers and I look forward to fighting collectively with partners across the country to get the contract we deserve. Our hope is that other stores in Iowa see our win for what it is—definitive proof that Starbucks’s union-busting is not the unbeatable enemy that it’s made out to be. It’s a challenge for sure, but one that can be overcome and crushed under the might of twenty-five fed up baristas who want what’s best for each other.

—Abigail Scheppmann has worked at Starbucks in Iowa downtown Iowa City for a year and a half. Her favorite drink is a cold brew.

Is 50 years of *Iowa Press* enough?

As the famous neuro-linguist George Lakoff has written, Republicans speak in generalities that allow them to obfuscate, evade, reframe, deny, justify, rationalize, normalize, and distort to make their anti-democratic ideas sound like they could possibly make sense. This works for them because of our dysfunctional and fragmented media system.

Here is just one example of Kim Reynolds doing all of the above on *Iowa Press* May 12 in response to a question about private schools raising tuition after voucher bill. “Any time you pass transformative legislation like we just did, a lot of times there is clean-up that needs to happen in the follow-up years. And so we’ll continue to monitor that. And it’s just like we passed, we provided flexibility to our public schools and I made it very clear that we’re going to continue to work over the interim and continue to look at Chapter 12 working with our public school administrators to see if there is additional things, additional burdens and requirements that we can relieve them of to give them more, continue to give them more flexibility so that they can be innovative and competitive. So I look forward to continuing that conversation as well.”

Did your eyes glaze over? Reynolds’ response is a successful attempt to gloss over the GOP’s putrid bills so the average viewer would not notice anything. Keen observers know what she communicated—she’s going to continue slashing public school budgets and helping private schools. She couldn’t say that, because people would not be for it. Therein lies the Republican dilemma.

The only reason Rs get away with this strategy on *Iowa Press* is because there are so few follow-up questions. If there is one, they can easily slip by it. Here’s another example:

Erin Murphy: “Have there been any examples that you can point to where the Auditor’s Office has gone too far?”

Reynolds: “I think there’s several out there... it does say he can’t have information he’s just curious about.”

Did anyone on the panel ask, “If there’s several out there, can you name one?” Or “What makes you think the auditor requests information he is “just curious” about?” That last one was more than likely something she made up out of whole cloth, but we’ll never know. They dropped the subject and moved onto the next question. Zero accountability. Every episode is full of this kind of missed opportunity.

Another example: Zach Nunn, a Republican who inexplicably was able to knock off Democrat Cindy Axne: “When I watch on the news a parent at a school board meeting being treated as a domestic terrorist, I think that struck a chord with a lot of parents that just for asking questions all of a sudden they were being put as an enemy of the state.” Another one of those accidentally-on-purpose misunderstandings where Republicans get it wrong to their advantage.

The facts: a letter from the National School Boards Association to US Attorney General Garland last fall argued that some violent threats against school officials “could be the equivalent to a form of domestic terrorism” that would warrant the intervention of federal law enforcement. In his response, Garland directed his agency to review strategies to address violent threats and harassment against school boards.”

Violent threats against school officials. Harassment. See the difference? Not just asking a question. Not just complaining. Yet the *Iowa Press* panel said nothing, did nothing, let it stand.

If journalists do not question or challenge elected officials, what are viewers supposed to believe? Are they going to think their representative is lying? No, why should they? After all, it was said on *Iowa Press* celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, a longstanding Iowa tradition. It was said on Iowa Public Television – not cable news, not rightwing media, not the internet. Republican lies and distortions are happening weekly on *Iowa Press* with only the lamest attempts to challenge them.

How they interact with Democrats on the show and how they interact with Republicans is a stark contrast. One viewer described it this way when Mariannette Miller-Meeks was on the program: “They might as well have brought her hot chocolate and slippers.” Democratic ideas are met with derision and scorn. Republican talking points are represented by the panel in the absence of a Republican. Anyone can watch and see this week after week.

The *Iowa Press* program does more harm than good. Helping Rs look good when they are defunding public schools, banning books, targeting the state auditor, passing voter suppression laws, taking away women’s rights, refusing federal dollars and stripping people of unemployment benefits they are entitled to, ignoring our polluted water, allowing big ag to run roughshod over everything. Oh, Rs didn’t get that terrible bill passed this year? Wait for it next year when the state gets even redder as Kim Reynolds has promised.

Iowa Press needs to update its format to match the times—or be cancelled.

—Trish Nelson is administrator of www.blogforiowa and writes frequently about media issues.

All tank and no think

In the very early year of 1996, *The Economist* made its first editorial case for same-sex marriage in an article titled “Let them wed.”

This was seismic for at least two reasons. First, no one at any point on the political spectrum was gearing up for the issue at that point. Second...well, *The Economist!* The extremely expensive, CEO-gear-ed publication that was a Bible in every corporate board room and business college was way ahead of the curve on this one. Iowa shocked the nation by coming on board in 2009, with a unanimous state Supreme Court ruling in *Varnum v. Brien*.

I reach back for this tidbit to throw into high relief how far we’ve fallen since then, and just what a disaster the recently-adjourned Iowa General Assembly was for our state. Iowa, you see, already had an image problem. In case you weren’t paying attention.

We’d had a fiasco of a caucus night in 2020 that cost us first in the nation status (though the GOP is clinging to fantasy and moving along in denial). Everyone has known for years we are blithely poisoning our water, beefing up industrio-corporate farms over family and other sustainable agricultural models, and in general edging closer to the event horizon that is template policymaking provided by GOP ‘think’ tanks. (These are, to no one’s surprise, all tank and no think.)

The economic, environmental, and ethical losses for Iowa piled up, but counterintuitively, so did big election wins for the GOP. They took this as a mandate to keep going, and here we are.

This year alone, majority leadership in our statehouse along with our governor and attorney general moved against public assistance, health care for women, safe health care for trans youth, public safety, libraries, teachers, workers, and more. There were bills to reverse same-sex marriage rights that were quickly and quietly shoved in drawers to smother. A bill that said any department being audited by the state’s auditor would have to agree that requested evidence was pertinent to the audit passed has been sent to the governor. The same bill prohibits the use of the courts by the auditor to challenge the governor on any investigation.

In yet another black eye for the state, child labor laws were dumbed down to allow for Dickensian child work situations and environments. There has already been a challenge from state senators. The federal government appears to agree with their arguments. Per the *Iowa Capital Dispatch* on May 17, “The child labor legislation awaiting Gov. Kim Reynolds’ signature does not comply with federal law, according to a letter from U.S. Department of Labor employees.”

The national media have taken notice of the state’s desire to dwell in the late middle ages. From pillar to post, Iowa is being publicly humiliated for its legislative brutality and lack of ethics, with these GOP bills cited as proof.

The stakes could not be higher. With property tax cuts on the rise, huge expenditures added to hound people off public assistance, an aging population, and this outright hostility to young families, college youth, and businesses in need of

workers, Iowa is in decline. Our economic and population growth are basement-worthy.

What do our leaders have to say? Let’s hear from Governor Kim Reynolds. I’ll use her words against her in a mean-spirited, out-of-context manner because it’s well-deserved. Here is what she had to say about the bill demeaning the lives of trans youth in our state. See if you don’t think it’s just right for the entire GOP menu of destructive public policy:

“My heart breaks,” Reynolds told reporters Tuesday. “I’ve sat down and met with them. It’s not easy. It’s not easy for me either. It’s not easy for our elected officials to make these decisions. So I just, I hope they know that.”

Oh, we know. We know exactly how hard it is to wreck a state and hobble a functional government and its services—to humiliate the poverty-stricken, to hound the disabled, to disempower women. And we see the singular devotion and focus with which you are doing just that. As we continue to decline, as our population dwindles, as our economy sputters, as our industries go begging for workers despite the new crop of child laborers you’ve tried to line up, we’ll remember how hard it was for you all to make these decisions. And we’ll wonder just what in the hell you were thinking.

—*Kim Painter has served as the Johnson County Recorder since 1999.*

The cost of doing business

The punishment should fit the crime” is a cliché that was popular years ago but seems to have disappeared from today’s conversations on justice.

Usually, a penalty is attached to the creation of a new law, but it’s either ignored or set so low that it becomes a gnat in the cost of doing business.

The Iowa Department of Natural Resources fined an Eastern Iowa farmer \$5,000 because he changed his Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) from pigs to a cattle feedlot operation without first obtaining a permit to do so. His excuse: he “didn’t know” he needed a new permit. The farmer agreed to pay the \$5,000 penalty and to apply for a construction permit amendment. Be assured that the construction permit will be approved by the DNR. If the \$5,000 fine had been a deterrent, the farmer would have ditched the plan to convert.

The Iowa Ethics and Campaign Disclosure Board is attempting to reel in thousands of dollars in fines levied against candidates that have gone unpaid. Candidates’ responses include “I didn’t know” or “the process of filing” reports are “riddled with technical difficulties.” However, media reports rarely follow up on whether candidates are ponying up their financial responsibilities, making the value of a potential deterrent nothing more than political capital.

Fareway Stores refuse to accept can and bottles for redemption “to minimize potential harm to the communities we serve.” Never mind that the law specifically requires the corporation to accept redeemable containers. But according to Iowa’s former Attorney General, there is no penalty for flouting the law on bottle

and can redemption. Moreover, the company does not have to employ another person to maintain bottle and can redemption services, the purchase or rental of automatic recycling machines, nor provide space for redeemed recyclables. Each of those factors add up to a windfall for Fareway. As with many corporate decisions, spin is in front, reality is in the rear. Savings is the bottom line.

POET Bioprocessing, a bioethanol company based in South Dakota, has been fined the maximum administrative penalty of \$10,000 by the Iowa Department of Natural Resources for ongoing violations involving failure to maintain equipment that has led to air pollution at its Iowa Falls plant, resulting in “repeatedly” emitting harmful chemicals. Recently, POET has reported \$8 billion in annual revenue. The fine amounts to one-tenth of a one percent bite into the company’s profit. That’s comparable to a person earning \$50,000 a year being fined two-tenths of one cent for a speeding violation. Is it any wonder POET didn’t appeal the fine? It’s the cost of doing business.

Some penalties exist for pure political posturing. House File 595 increases the penalties for certain crimes involving fentanyl, sometimes doubling the prison term. Although fentanyl can be a dangerous street drug, increasing penalties to combat the manufacture, sale, and distribution of the drug is a politically practical solution that has extraordinarily little value as a deterrent. The real autocracy in the governor signing the bill is her statement where she “blamed the Biden administration’s handling of the U.S.-Mexico border for the influx of fentanyl-laced pills.”

Anyone who believes fentanyl is being smuggled into the U.S. by individuals stashing pills into their pockets does not have a perception of reality. According to the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration, fentanyl is “smuggled through official border crossings, often in vehicles driven by U.S. citizens.” But Iowa’s governor wants you to believe that it is Hispanic immigrants that are to blame for the infusion of dangerous drugs in America, and especially in Iowa.

Some laws fail to provide any sort of penalty. For instance, State Representative Bobby Kaufmann (R-Wilton) introduced a bill (House File 716) that requires a person participating in the political caucus to be physically present at the caucus. So, the question arises, what will the penalty be if the Iowa Democratic Party proceeds with its plan to retain “the mail-in provision in its new plan” for the 2024 caucuses? Since there is no penalty at the state level, the otherwise brilliant political tactic created by Rep. Kaufmann becomes moot.

It comes down to this: deterrence does not always work. If money is involved, the deterrent value is equal to the cost of doing business. A decision to comply with a penalty is recommended by the legal department of a corporation discussing the potential results with the accounting department and submitting the exhortation to upper-level management to decide whether “the punishment fits the crime.”

Makes you wonder if the slight penalties in statutes that affect the wealthy and corporations are soft on white collar crime.

—Marty Ryan is President of *Iowans Against the Death Penalty*.

Reach across the forest floor

As a writer, storytelling comes easily to me. That whole 10th-grade English arc of rising and falling action is lodged so deeply in my brain that it seems utterly innate. I forget that others aren't immediately comfortable with being asked to share a story, whether written or oral.

Yet whether we do so consciously or not, we all tell stories. Stories have been our connective thread for thousands of years. From our earliest stages of living together, humans have used stories to entertain ourselves during long winters; to explain the mysteries of life cycles; and to warn of potential dangers. Many of our greatest technological advances have been inspired by this elemental craft—the printing press, radio, talking films, the Internet.

I've come to believe that story is as important to our survival as any scientific discovery. My belief is hardly novel. During last fall's Iowa City Book Festival, two writers called for better stories. Novelist Anthony Doerr and essayist Rebecca Solnit gave presentations as stylistically different as their writing—one full of fantastical images and historical anecdotes, the other urgent and sometimes scolding.

If you listened carefully, though, you have heard that they ended on a similar note. To boldly paraphrase two of our greatest contemporary authors, Doerr and Solnit said that climate change is the most important issue of our time, *and* that storytelling is a major tool in helping us navigate our way through.

“Every crisis is in part a storytelling crisis,” Solnit has written. “We are hemmed in by stories that prevent us from seeing, or believing in, or acting on the possibilities for change.”

Certainly, stories can be used for ill. Many Americans are currently under the sway of stories that people in power tell for personal gain. Other stories become rigid and stagnant. The princess always ends up with the prince because no one provides a compelling alternative.

I'm in the midst of my own storytelling challenge. Last summer, I left a longtime job to start business, which recently added a nonprofit wing, called Hypha. My work is dedicated to using storytelling to connect individuals and organizations toward more resilient communities. Why “Hypha?” It is the rootlike tentacle of a fungus, the purpose of which is to reach across the forest floor and connect with other hyphae and share information.

I offer various opportunities that move from the individual to the organizational. In workshops and retreats, we use writing and movement to recall our life stories. In gatherings that I facilitate for local non-profits, people share the stories that are central to why they do their work and how to reimagine it.

For anyone who wants to intentionally experience the power of storytelling, I organize a monthly event called Story Swap. Each Swap is held in conjunction with a local nonprofit around a theme of vital importance. A seed storyteller—someone who has had time to craft a really juicy tale—starts us off. They're like the person at a dinner party who has everyone's attention as they share an amazing thing that happened to them, complete with well-placed asides and details. When they're done, everyone else wants to jump in with their own narratives.

I provide theme-related prompts at the Swaps, and then we move into

small groups to share our impromptu stories. At the end, we reconvene and hear from the partner organization about what they are doing related to the theme. Story Swaps build empathy and curiosity between people in the community, unite us around common concern for our home, and provide learning about the often invisible work of local nonprofits.

If you've been to a Story Swap, you'll likely remember the 14-year-old who expressed awe at the silence they experienced during their first overnight camping trip, which was sponsored by United Action for Youth. Or a man who received a handmade ceramic bowl from a student, and how after it accidentally broke, he spent hours gluing it back together during the pandemic lockdown.

In *Game of Thrones*, Tyrion Lannister asked, “What unites people?” Not gold or armies or flags, he said. “No. It's stories. There's nothing in the world more powerful than a good story. Nothing can stop it. No enemy can defeat it.” We must share our stories if we are going to survive together. We must celebrate and not deny that we are storytelling animals.

—Jennifer New is the author of three books and the owner of Hypha, at hyphaconnect.com.

Stop talking about reparations for slavery

The campaign to whitewash the reality of race relations in America was exposed for its awful self in the expulsion of two Black legislators from the Tennessee House of Representatives in April of this year. The popular uprising that chanted “No Justins, No Peace” punched back artfully and forcefully, but the underlying ugliness of white supremacy still grows. In Iowa, Governor Kim Reynolds kicked off the nationwide “Fear of Woke” campaign in 2021 with a ban on teaching the truth about racism in America, but it’s been a labor of love for right-wing culture warriors nationwide.

The audacity of the cultural fascists and their fight against truth-telling needs to be brought into sharp focus in our discussion of race. We need to stop talking about “reparations for slavery” and call what happened in America after the Civil War what it was—a genocide.

In the Civil War, our country paid a blood price of roughly 750,000 dead souls to eliminate the stain of slavery from our Constitution. During Reconstruction, we stood at the doorway of what could have been an open and multi-racial democracy.

Unfortunately, White society closed that door and turned in a direction that made what came after slavery orders demonstrably worse. We dangled the promise of freedom before Black Americans, then cruelly took it away. White society had a chance to make amends for slavery, but instead closed the open door and turned toward genocide. America built the world’s first color-based caste system out of whole cloth and used genocide to maintain it during what we now euphemistically call the Jim Crow era.

It’s time to rip that Jim Crow band-aid right off and stop using that euphemism. It’s time to level the charge of genocide against the American apartheid state and its citizens.

Genocide, under international law, has five elements. The American Apartheid Genocide system (which, as Isabel Wilkerson so ably demonstrated in her book *Caste*, was the inspiration for both the Nazi and South African apartheid regimes) met all five. Murder of a targeted ethnic group? Check. Causing serious bodily and mental harm? Check. Preventing births? Check. Forcibly transferring children out? Check. Incitement to commit acts? No incitement needed—all of the above were supported by the law and a carnival atmosphere of death and intimidation that existed during the Apartheid Genocide era.

The crime of genocide has been levelled before, but it must be leveled again. Revanchist Whites like Governor Reynolds and Rep. Steven Holt, R-Denison, are aggressively trying to whitewash our history. The charge must be leveled against the people who committed this crime and all those who abetted the crime through inaction or action. Payment for the crime of genocide is a debt owed by the entirety of White society. While an overwhelming majority of Whites today would never see themselves as guilty of this genocide, the only people who can even try to claim any exemption from the charge of genocide are committed anti-racists of the last 100 years. If that population of anti-racists totaled even one-quarter of one percent of White society, it would be a miracle. And if there’s a photo of your grandparents

hanging out in the town square at a lynching, you and your descendants are triply responsible.

It’s too easy for White people in America to ask why they should pay reparations for something that happened 400 years ago. That’s why we need to stop talking about reparations for slavery and start talking about reparations for genocide. Until the crime is called what it is, and our society is forced to come to terms with it, as well as genocides and near-genocides against Indigenous, Asian, and Latino populations, none of us will truly be equal and none of us will ever be free.

It’s time for a thorough accounting of what’s owed to all Black Americans. It’s time to pay up - or, put another way, time to fill out and sign the blank check Rev. Martin Luther King spoke of at the March on Washington in 1963.

It’s time for Iowa City’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission to take concrete steps to examine the ledger and determine the balance of our debt to Black America. If we don’t do this now, fascists like Kim Reynolds, Ron DeSantis, and others who would whitewash our debt to Black America will get away with hiding the crime. The State of Iowa can’t be counted on to tell the truth. Iowa City must lead the way.

—*Iowa City native Craig Perrin now lives in northern California.*

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