

## Epigenetics

This month, as it has for the past 36 years, the Summer [Fishtrap Gathering](#) in Joseph, Oregon, assembled a faculty of notable writers who offered a week's worth of genre-specific workshops for registered participants. The authors also anchored evening readings and panel discussions open to the public. The year 2023's impressive lineup included Craig Childs, Debra Magpie Earling, Jamie Ford, Perrin Kerns, Anis Mojgani, Rena Priest, Kim Stafford and Luis Urrea. No wonder nearly 200 attendees made the trek.

The Summer Gathering is always theme-based and this year "Generations" was the center pole. Guest authors read about pivotal incidents in the life of their family, others about wrongs to their people or culture, still others about a deceased parent finally recognized for who they were, or the belated realization that an ancestor had led a life that deserved recounting. A sense of regret, of opportunities missed pervaded many of the presentations.

Regret is generally defined as pain or distress over something done or left undone. As a child, that notion was underscored in unison at Episcopal church every Sunday.

"We have left undone those things which we ought to have done and we have done those things which we ought not to have done and there is no health in us." Curiously, there was a decline in the use of the word "regret" from the 1950s until the 2000s, according to (what else) Google, at which point mentions started increasing rapidly. Could that surge be due to the glut of Baby Boomers reaching a certain age and looking back at their lives? At family or friends neglected? Opportunities missed? Harsh words not retracted?

In her 2012 New York Times article, "Praise Is Fleeting, but Brickbats We Recall," Alina Tugend wrote, "My sisters and I have often marveled that the stories we tell over and over about our childhood tend to focus on what went wrong. I assumed that we were unusual in zeroing in on our negative experiences. But it turns out we're typical." Tugend references an article titled, "Bad is Stronger than Good" co-authored by Roy F. Baumeister, a professor of social psychology at Florida State University.

He writes, "Bad emotions, bad parents and bad feedback have more impact than good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones. As with many other quirks of the human psyche, there may be an evolutionary basis for this. Those who are more attuned to bad things would have been more likely to survive threats and, consequently, would have increased the probability of passing along their genes." And, by the way, that includes emotional genes.

Please welcome author Jamie Ford to the stage. He is the great-grandson of Nevada mining pioneer, Min Chung, who emigrated from Hoiping, China, to San Francisco in 1865, where he adopted the Western name, Ford, "Thus confusing countless generations," quips the author. Ford's debut novel, "Hotel on the Corner of Bitter and Sweet," spent two years on the New York Times bestseller list. The genesis of his latest novel, "The Many Daughters of Afong Moy," also a bestseller, inspired his comments at this year's Fishtrap. As the result of exploring his ancestors' responses to adversity, he turned to epigenetics (aka emotional DNA) for answers. We've likely

all heard or have witnessed the manifestations of generational trauma — unfounded fears, obsessions, addictions — but Ford believes we have neglected the epigenetic evidence and power of generational joy and optimism. Yes, it takes focus and constant practice, given how tenacious the negative is, but the rewards of that effort are what the world needs now. As a newcomer to mountain biking, he offered an analogy he had apparently learned the hard way. When mountain biking, he explained, you can bet a large rock will appear in the trail. If, when moving at the speed of life, you focus on the rock, you will hit it. If you focus on the path around it, you won't.

Ford says to start with forgiving...ourselves. "Forgiveness," he says, "is giving up all hope for a better past." I don't know about you, but the exquisite and elusive truth contained in that definition stops me in my tracks. Once realized, as Ford says, then a better future can unfold. What you choose to focus on is the experience you will have. So, what's not to like about choosing optimism and, thereby, scripting a joyous emotional DNA for generations to come.