



Disregard for our impacts on others lies at heart of today's ills

BY [BOB DOPPELT](#) POSTED ON [07/23/2020](#)

After more than 10 years of writing columns for *The Register-Guard*, it was time for a change. I am pleased to say I will now write for *Eugene Weekly*.

One lesson I've learned through my work is that self-focused disregard for the impacts of one's actions on others lies at the heart of most of today's social, economic, and ecological problems. The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed this dynamic for all to see.

Case in point is an experience I recently had with the Eugene Police Department.

I was pulled over by the police while driving into town. Neither of the two officers who stopped me was wearing a mask. One leaned down, and from just outside my open car window, no more than three feet away, said they pulled me over because my license plate was out of date.

The maskless officer continued to talk to me for about 15 minutes from three feet away, asking for my driver's license, returning it and inquiring about the registration.

About three quarters of the way through the incident it dawned on me that the officer was not wearing a mask. So I ask her to move back and practice social distancing. She did not do so.

After more dialogue the officers told me I should get the registration fixed and left without issuing a citation. As they walked back to their vehicle I became concerned about what had just transpired, leaned out my window, and asked why she was not wearing a mask. She responded, "I'm not going to go back and forth with you about that," and walked away.

That's when it really sank in that my health — and because I am older, in the god-forbid absolute worst case scenario, my life — could now potentially be at risk.

Even if the officer feels fine, she could be pre-symptomatic. And, the CDC estimates that up to 25 percent of infected people are asymptomatic, and she could be a “silent spreader,” which a study published by the National Academy of Sciences said could be responsible for about half the cases of COVID-19.

The reverse is also true. If I had the virus, the officer might now be infected and give it to other members of the public she interacts with and to her fellow officers and family as well.

I was first told that the officer's action was inappropriate, and they had been directed to wear masks in the future. But later I learned that officers were not required to wear masks because the guidelines issued by Oregon Gov. Kate Brown and the Centers for Disease Control did not necessitate it.

Fortunately, I did not get the virus. And, not long after my scary experience, Brown issued an order requiring people to wear masks outdoors when they cannot social distance. The order applies to the police as well, so I hope they will not put the public at risk again during traffic stops again. However, the practice should apply to all police interactions with the public, including protests, where officers have been seen not wearing masks.

But this does not change the reality that the officers I interacted with were concerned only about their own protocols and needs and failed to consider how they might harm me. And, because they held a position of authority, they did not feel the need to justify their behavior. And I am white. I wonder if the officers would have responded any differently if a person of color had asked them to back away and social distance, and why they were not wearing masks.

My experience highlights, once again, how self-interested indifference to the harmful impacts of one's actions on others dominates our society. It's not just the police. This is apparent in the people who proclaim that wearing masks impinges on their freedom and push back against public health, elected officials and businesses that require it.

The pattern is also evident in the oil and gas industry that, to protect its investments and profits, puts all of humanity at risk by refusing to slash emissions. The Canadian-based Pembina company, for example, is pushing hard to build a liquefied natural gas export terminal in Coos Bay and construct a 229-mile gas pipeline to transport the fuel there. Not only would the pipeline violate the property rights of the many landowners who oppose it, the project would also become the largest single source of greenhouse gases in Oregon.

Reckless self-interest rules supreme in many other sectors of society as well.

Many people today seem stuck in the mindset that no matter what the impact, pursuing one's self-interest is the only way things can be. The fears generated by the Pandemic have strengthened this belief. Ample research and experience, however, have proven this view wrong — and destructive.

Mindsets can often change just by being aware of them and their effect on others, experimenting with different responses. Individuals and organizations throughout Eugene might consider taking time now to surface and explore their beliefs about self-interest. We are all likely to end up safer and healthier.

Bob Doppelt coordinates the International Transformational Resilience Coalition (ITRC).