

Vincent

I've heard the song a thousand times. Its actual title is "Vincent," but we mostly know it as "Starry, Starry Night." I really never listened to the words until I saw them with a video; now, I can't get them out of my mind:

*Starry, starry night,
Paint your palette blue and gray,
Look out on a summer's day,
With eyes that know the darkness in my soul.
Shadows on the hills,
Sketch the trees and the daffodils,
Catch the breeze and the winter chills,
In colors on the snowy, linen land.*

The song is Don McLean's 1971 tribute to Vincent van Gogh, who struggled his entire life with mental illness. Van Gogh's life is not well documented because of his work as an artist; rather, he is illustrated by his own words as an avid letter-writer. Most of his surviving 819 letters were written to his younger brother, Theo. Letters written to Vincent are also saved.

Van Gogh's mental health issues have become legendary, with a gold mine of scholarly studies and articles written by hundreds of doctors worldwide. There are indications of everything from mood disorders to depression, anxiety, psychotic episodes, bipolar, some form of epilepsy and even schizophrenia.

*Morning fields of amber grain,
Weathered faces lined in pain,
Are soothed beneath the artist's loving hand.
Now, I understand, what you tried to say to me,
How you suffered for your sanity,
How you tried to set them free.
They would not listen, they did not know how.
Perhaps they'll listen now.*

They really didn't know. The complexity of Van Gogh's mental illness is so far beyond what even the experts have been able to determine that it makes me wonder: If Van Gogh's life is still being debated by experts, how in the world are we to know and understand what our own loved ones are living through?

*And when no hope was left inside,
On that starry, starry night,
You took your life as lovers often do.
But I could have told you, Vincent,
This world was never meant for one
As beautiful as you.*

Vincent van Gogh died by suicide on July 29, 1890, at the age of 37. He had spent 10 years drawing and painting, agonizing over life and doing his best to cope. During his lifetime, he lived in abject, humiliating poverty and sold just one painting for a very small amount to his brother. He left behind a collection of 1,100 drawings and 900 paintings.



Random Reflections
by Diane Leukam

This remarkable body of work is now more popular than ever, his most famous being "The Starry Night," painted from memory while staying in an asylum in 1889 due to his illness. The painting is currently valued around \$110 million and is a permanent fixture at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City. His most expensive painting to date, "Portrait of Dr. Paul Gachet," sold for \$83 million in 1990 – in today's money, upwards of \$183 million.

Don and I went to the Van Gogh Immersive Experience in Scottsdale, Arizona, in December, an exhibit more than 5 million people have attended worldwide. Using today's technology, Van Gogh's most compelling works came to life in layers, bit by bit, before our eyes. More than 20,000 square feet of "canvas" in the dark, two stories high, surrounded us, the work of a man who painted what was in his heart, baring his soul for those who were able to see.

In a letter to Theo in 1878, Vincent wrote about an artist who had just died: "It must be good to die in the knowledge that one has done some truthful work and to know that, as a result, one will live on in the memories of at least a few."

Van Gogh never got the opportunity to envision this for himself. He died ill, destitute and alone.

Ironically, one of his greatest works may be to foster a more in-depth discussion on mental illness. It's about time. After all, if we can champion survivors of cancer and mourn those who have succumbed, why must we whisper about mental and behavioral health, or even suicide? Maybe we are afraid talking about it will make a bad situation worse, or we don't want to create more hurt. We do know mental health is so complex that often, even experts struggle to help. It also affects loved ones so dramatically, so painfully.

*How you suffered for your sanity,
How you tried to set them free.*

*They would not listen, they're not listening still,
Perhaps they never will.*

I believe we are listening now, to the best of our current abilities, and I hope Van Gogh is somehow able to see that he is indeed living on in the memories of "at least a few." Our loved ones lost to mental illness live on in our hearts as well. They were beautiful people, too, who struggled with an extremely difficult type of illness.

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. Much is being done currently, and let's keep advancing this message. To learn more about mental illness, visit the National Alliance on Mental Illness at nami.org.

*Flaming flowers that brightly blaze,
Swirling clouds in violet haze,
Reflect in Vincent's eyes of china blue,
Colors changing hue.*

Baby boom

The first week of May was a pretty big deal for my little corner of the universe. Firstly, that week was when my wife and I finally announced the impending arrival of our family's latest member. Secondly, the week contained the birthday of the youngest of my three siblings, Laura. You might not have known about those two events, but I'll bet you heard about the third one: the supreme court opinion leak about the possible overturn of Roe v Wade, the news dropping right before Mother's Day.



Ultra Sonnek
by Ben Sonnek

Starting from the top, I preemptively thank you for whatever congratulations you may be wishing me as my family grows. Maggie and I are happy to be expecting again, and Eoghan is already excited to have a little brother. Yes, the child will be another boy. No, I'm not telling you the potential name candidates. You don't want to settle on a name like, say, Leopold, and be confronted with a post-delivery specimen who couldn't adequately be described as anything other than a Bruce. Anyway, as always, your prayers for a safe pregnancy and birth are welcome.

Next, there's my sister's birthday. I couldn't celebrate it with her in person, sadly enough, because she lives in California and I had to write this newspaper. Why is she in California, you ask? Well, it's because she's a better artist than you. I'm not trying to denigrate Sauk Centre's artists, mind; a simple downtown stroll will testify to the strength of our creative community. However, I will still insist that my little sister, Laura, is better. She's been an artist since forever, getting scholarship offers before she was even considering colleges – while being homeschooled, no less – and the only place advanced enough for her to refine her work was California.

It's unnerving for me to think there may be some alternate reality where Laura never happened. I'm the third out of my parents' four children; from what my mom tells me, not long after I was born, a doctor asked her if she'd considered various birth control options ("Nice to meet you too, buddy," I wish I could've said in reply). Well, my mom got married with four baby names in mind, and darn if she wasn't going to use them all. Good thing she did, too. If she didn't, not only would you be deprived of a contagiously enthusiastic and uncommonly artistic individual, but I'd be without a little sister.

That, of course, brings me to topic number three. I'm not surprised there was a leak from the Supreme Court, considering the last decade's significant decline in institutional decorum. Still, if Roe v Wade gets overturned and abortion legislation goes back to the states, I'm happy to think there will be some states coming to the defense of the unborn. This state seems like a long shot, though; Governor Walz has already issued a statement supporting our country's multi-billion-dollar abortion industry, which strikes me as a funny thing for a former teacher to do. Maybe he only taught the annoying kids, I don't know.

One rallying cry I've heard in defense of Roe v Wade is that people who oppose abortion actually do not care about babies and women – or "birthing bodies," to use the latest vernacular in overcomplicated human terminology. They say we only care about babies before they're born and that, after the child arrives and the bills need to be paid, we're gone. I can't deny everything's gotten ridiculously expensive; I mean, I've already been on the receiving end of a post-birth hospital bill, wondering where all those numbers came from. So, how can we make a safe childbirth less of a luxury for the rich? I don't know, so I'm just going to sit here outside Sauk Centre's Options for Women office until an answer comes to me.

On the other hand, in a land of such aggressive commercialism and marketing, it's weird that the one thing we're told we can't afford is a baby. I can't get through a 10-minute YouTube video without at least three ads asking me to pitch money at a creature comfort, subscription service or expensive automobile, the last of which eclipses a birthing bill like an 18-wheeler over a go-kart. Maybe that's why our broader culture is in favor of abortion: It's better for business, even as it snuffs future customers. Your average new parents always have to reconsider their priorities when junior is on the way, determining what they can do without so their child can live well. Hey, those unnecessary goods – and unnecessary evils – pale in comparison to the irreplaceable, unique human life developing before our eyes. I know my mom would say that about Laura. I know I can say that about Eoghan, and I'll doubtless say the same about his new little brother.

For more, I strongly recommend you all read the entirety of G.K. Chesterton's brief essay "Babies and Distributism," but for now, let me leave you with its closing lines: "People who prefer the mechanical pleasures [...] are preferring the last, crooked, indirect, borrowed, repeated, and exhausted things of our dying Capitalist civilization, to the reality which is the only rejuvenation of all civilization. It is they who are hugging the chains of their old slavery; it is the child who is ready for the new world."

I hope you all had a happy Mother's Day.

Counties cooperate for traffic safety task force

This month, as the temperatures warm up and we all start traveling, I wanted to address traffic safety and traffic laws. We all know that traffic laws are designed and written to protect us, and it is important to follow them. There has been an ever-increasing trend that law enforcement has noticed in Minnesota regarding speeding and distracted driving. This in turn has led to an increase in traffic accidents, accidents with injuries and even fatal accidents.

Stearns County has been in the top 10 of the deadliest counties amongst all counties in Minnesota. This past year has not helped us reverse this trend. While some of it can be attributed to the sheer size of our county, these fatal accidents have occurred in the county limits but also in city limits and the state highway system.

In an effort to lessen this problem, the Stearns County Sheriff's Office has joined forces with the Minnesota State Patrol, the Wright County Sheriff's Office and the Sherburne County Sheriff's Office to form a traffic safety task force. This task force takes a collaborative and cooperative approach to traffic enforcement in an effort to educate drivers and, at times, cite violators. While the main goal



County Sheriff
by Steve Soyka

is to improve traffic safety, violations will occur, and this task force is designed for and encouraged to cite operators who violate the laws.

The task force is comprised of Minnesota State Troopers and sheriff's office deputies who will meet on several different days and conduct extra enforcement. This enforcement will be taking place in all three counties, so you may see a Sherburne County or Wright County squad car conducting traffic stops in your area. The task force launched and conducted their first enforcement wave on Friday, May 6.

This collaborative effort took a little bit of work to formalize as all agencies have different records systems and county attorneys for charging purposes. Some standards had to be worked through, and a collective Joint Powers Agreement had to be written for all involved and then approved by all three county boards before any work could begin.

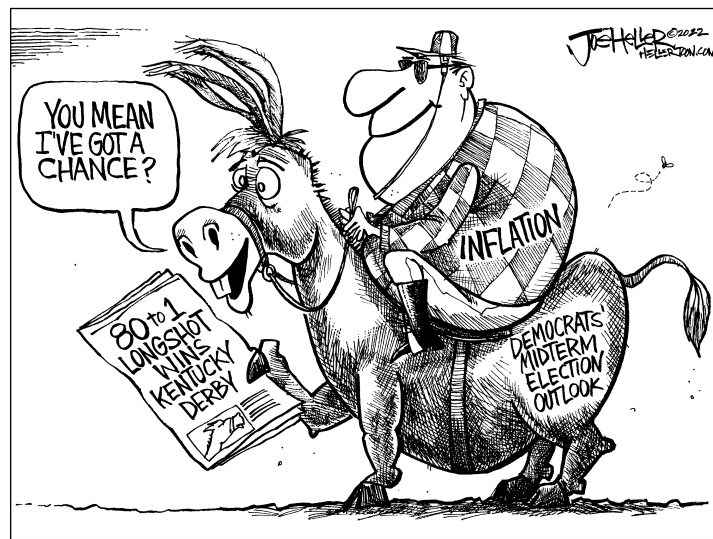
While no one wants to get a ticket, remember that it is your choice on how you choose to drive. It is hoped that the presence of this task force will help curtail some of the high speeds we are seeing and in turn reduce accidents, road rage incidents and even deaths.

Letters to the editor accepted

Letters to the editor and other opinion articles are welcome. Letters must be signed with a first and last name and include an address and phone number. Letters must be under 400 words and be submitted by Monday at 5 p.m.

They can be emailed to office@saukherald.com, mailed to Sauk Centre Herald, 522 Sinclair Lewis Ave., Sauk Centre, MN 56378 or dropped off at the office.

email to office@saukherald.com



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Letters: Letters to the editor and other opinion articles are welcomed. Letters must be signed with first and last name and include address and phone number. Letters should be short and to the point. We reserve the right to edit lengthy letters.

Corrections/Clarifications: The Herald strives for accuracy. If you would like to report a factual error, please call 352-6577.

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