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## Guest column: Moving forward in 'winter of hardship'

**By Suzie ZQ Taylor**

For The Daily Astorian

John Steinbeck's *Winter of Our Discontent* tells the story of Ethan Hawley, a man desperate to improve his social and economic standing by nearly any means. Hawley wreaks deceit and corruption that soon leads him to contemplate suicide. (I will not ruin the ending, in case you have not read the book.)

Steinbeck wrote the novel to address what he deemed the moral degeneration of American culture.

President Obama's first news conference since his inauguration laid out the "winter of our hardship" with dire circumstances far worse than Hawley or Steinbeck could imagine. And yet, I feel a faint but steady undercurrent of hope, don't you? (Yes, I know the word "hope" is somewhat cliché but it seems to fit our state of wishfulness and expectancy.) Even as words like "trillion," "stimulus," "stabilize," "crisis," "catastrophe" and "unemployment" threaten to crumble the ground beneath our collective feet, many Americans are cautiously but intrinsically poised for transformation, balance and relief.

We diligently go about our daily lives, perhaps job hunting, dollar stretching or mattress stuffing, while quietly curious if the federal balm will ease our worries. But even if President Obama had also been elected Santa Claus, I'm fairly certain that not everyone is going to end up on the "nice" list and there won't be enough shiny packages to go around.

So how do we - ordinary citizens in a town far removed from the flurry of long-winded political pundits, finger pointers, and naysayers - make this the winter of our future, our winter of hope rather than Hawley's despair or Obama's prognosis?

### **Building together**

Conceivably, we are capable of finding hope under the rubble of it all, and when hope allows us to build something together, we move forward. We know that building community takes more than hammer and nails, more than recovery plans and job creation. Building community means rekindling humanity, restoring faith to the disillusioned, and doing our part.

These pillars of hope are exemplified in the simple works of regular people along the North Coast: Seaside surfers who banded together to clean up their favorite stretch of beach; Astoria volunteer firefighters who answer the midnight call to douse a blaze and

still make it to their day jobs; the neighbor who drags back an emptied gargantuan recycling bin for you in lousy weather. And the staff at the Columbia River Coffee Roaster, who placed a modest advertisement in The Daily Astorian beckoning locals to congregate at the coffee house for the historic presidential inauguration with the lure of free homemade brownies.

I felt part of something that day, as I stood in Astoria amid an impressive crowd of brownie-loving patriots watching the 44th president end his honeymoon period and forge his place in history. Tears spilled down my chocolate-stuffed cheeks, as I witnessed what I did not expect to see in my lifetime - not just an African-American being sworn in to guide the nation forward, but a long moment of unity among disparate peoples, both within our borders and around the planet.

When was the last time we really felt part of something important, powerful? For North Coast residents, possibly it was the Great Coastal Gale of 2007 when we clustered together without heat or phones or supplies. Whether we were involved in an official emergency response capacity or were just a group of neighbors lugging giant limbs from streets and helping each other restore a semblance of normalcy, you and I were part of something. We shared food and stories, huddled around radios and fireplaces, and when it was over, we figured out how to do it better next time.

Aren't we there again, surrounded by that which is bigger than ourselves - whether we like it or not? So as we answer the president's call to do our part, to engage in our communities and summon the unique talents that lie within each of us, we can perhaps be bolstered in knowing that we as a nation of small towns, will do it better this go-round.

Our collective can-do, will-do attitude may not get the nation out of debt or stop financial entities from wreaking more havoc, but it may very well inspire others to make a difference, to step outside the decadent individualism that has stagnated the country for nearly a decade. (Let us save the gooey decadence for brownies.)

Sadly, *Winter of Our Discontent* was Steinbeck's last novel before he died in 1968 - another very tumultuous time in our country's history. I wonder if he were among us today, would he sit brooding in disgust over America's social and economic decline or would he perch hopefully on the precipice of change, pen in hand, conjuring up characters that embody optimism, credibility, and a desire to contribute to our shared future.

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