Indigenous human cultures are vanishing at an alarming rate. Fully 50 percent of the more than 6,000 languages spoken today will cease to exist in our lifetime. Approximately every two weeks, someone dies and takes with them the last syllables of an ancient tongue. With them go the knowledge, stories, customs, and footprints of entire cultures. Wade Davis, a National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence, has dedicated his life to studying endangered cultures and preserving the traditional languages, beliefs, myths, and dreams that constitute humanity’s cultural inheritance—a legacy that he calls the “ethnosphere.”

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Oregon Humanities Center
Winter 2013

Ira Byock, M.D. speaks on compassionate end-of-life care

Our “being human | human being” series continues in late January with two lectures by Ira Byock, M.D., Director of Palliative Medicine at Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire. During his medical school residency in the late 1970s, Byock witnessed his father’s battle with pancreatic cancer. This experience was transformative for Byock, and ultimately led him into the fields of hospice and palliative care. He is now one of the leading proponents of compassionate end-of-life care in the United States. A consistent advocate for the rights of dying patients and their families, Byock sees death as central to the meaning and value of human life. In his view, the universal inevitability of death provides the backdrop against which life is lived, and demands that we carefully consider our values and life choices as individuals, family members, and communities.

In his Eugene lecture, “Mortality, Morality, and the Meaning of Life,” (Thursday, January 24, 2013 at 7:30 p.m. in 282 Lillis Hall), Byock will argue that the precarious nature of life asks all of us to consider the question, “How then shall we

Wade Davis: humanity’s greatest legacy is the “ethnosphere”

continued on page 2

continued on page 3
Renowned neuroscientist David Eagleman reveals mysteries of the brain

Are we simply the products of our brains and neurobiology, or is there more to being human than the marvelous and mysterious grey matter in our skulls? How can we be certain that what we perceive is “reality”? How much do we really know about human nature? David Eagleman will explore these and other questions in his Robert D. Clark Lecture in the Humanities, “Incognito: The Secret Lives of the Brain,” on Tuesday, March 5, 2013 at 7:30 p.m. in 182 Lillis Hall on the UO campus.

Eagleman asks, “If the conscious mind—the part you consider you—accounts for only a fraction of the brain’s function, what is all the rest doing?” Eagleman has spent years researching this question, and has uncovered some startling new answers. He will show how our behavior, thoughts, and experiences are inextricably linked to a vast, wet, chemical-electrical network known as our nervous system, and take us on a journey into our subconscious minds. Eagleman charts new territory in neuroscience, and helps us understand how our perceptions of ourselves and our world result from the hidden workings of the human brain—a wondrously complex organ humorously described by Eagleman as “a team of rivals.”

A 2011 Guggenheim Fellow, Eagleman holds joint appointments in the Departments of Neuroscience and Psychiatry at Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, TX. He is the founder and director of the Initiative on Neuroscience and the Law. He writes regularly for the New York Times, Wired, Discover, Slate, and New Scientist, and is a repeat guest on NPR, discussing both science and literature—his two passions. He is also the author of several books, including The Secret Lives of the Brain (2011), which was on the NY Times bestseller list. His novel, Sum: Forty Tales from the Afterlives (2009), was named the Best Book of the Year by Barnes and Noble, and inspired U2 producer Brian Eno to write twelve new pieces of music, which he performed with Eagleman at the Sydney Opera House.

The lecture is free and open to the public, and will be followed by a book sale and signing. For more information, or for disability accommodations (which must be made by Feb. 26), please call (541) 346-3934.

Byock continued from page 1

live?” He believes we have the capacity to respond to death in creative and caring ways that express essential human values and create meaning.

Byock’s second Oregon lecture, “The Best Care Possible Through the End of Life: What It Is and How to Get It,” will take place at the UO in Portland, White Stag Block, 70 NW Couch St. on Friday, January 25th at 7 p.m. We all want the best care possible for our loved ones and ourselves through the very end of life, but one size does not fit all. As our health care system and society strive to respond to unprecedented demographic and resource challenges, we need to think outside the box. Byock asserts that by supporting families, strengthening communities, and fostering cultural change, the best care really is possible.

In addition to being director of Palliative Medicine, Ira Byock is a professor of Anesthesiology and also of Community and Family Medicine at the Geisel School of Medicine at Dartmouth. During the 1990s he co-founded the Missoula, Montana Demonstration Project, a community-based program dedicated to research on and the transformation of end-of-life care, with the goal of creating models that could work on a national level. Byock has authored numerous articles on the ethics and practice of palliative care and hospice. His first book, Dying Well (1997), has become a standard in the field. The Four Things That Matter Most (2004) is used widely as a counseling tool by palliative care and hospice programs. His most recent book, The Best Care Possible (2012), tackles the crisis that surrounds serious illness and dying in America, and details Byock’s quest to transform care through the end of life.

Byock is the OHC’s 2012–13 Tzedek Professor in the Humanities. Both lectures are free and open to the public and will be followed by a book sale and signing. View live-streaming video of the lectures at ohc.uoregon.edu. For more information, contact ohc@uoregon.edu or (541) 346-3934.
Director’s Report

As this newsletter reaches you, our being human | human being series is well underway. Michelle Alexander, civil rights activist and lawyer, launched our year’s programing with a riveting, impassioned lecture on “The New Jim Crow” and the need for prison reform, speaking to a full house and a full overflow room. If you missed her in person, you can watch her talk on line. Come winter term, we’ll be moving from the world of law and public policy to medicine and end-of-life care with Ira Byock (January); cultural anthropology with Wade Davis (February); and neuroscience with David Eagleman (March). You’ll find details on those events in these pages.

If you were to step back a moment and look at our line-up for the year with a critical eye, you might be surprised that a humanities center is featuring guests who come primarily from law, medicine, and science. That orientation has not gone unnoted, and I’m happy to have the chance to explain our approach. The OHC is a “humanities” center as opposed to a “Humanities” center. “What’s the difference?” you might ask. Well, we understand and serve the humanities in the broadest meaning of the word. Reaching beyond the traditional disciplines allows us to explore to what extent a humanist approach has infiltrated, or is inherent to, the conversations that dominate so much of our daily world. Lawyers, doctors, policy makers, brain scientists, and cultural anthropologists—all need to consider the human condition, and have a great deal to say about it.

Our policy was to adopt, for one year, a slate of speakers from what we Humanists generally consider the “other” disciplines. As we hoped, it’s putting on stage the broad sweep and centrality of humanist concerns. What’s more, as Michelle Alexander’s talk demonstrated, we’re attracting new audiences who will know the OHC as a place that invests in discussion about real-life, current-day concerns. Please come see for yourselves! And here’s advance notice of the 2013–14 program: we’ll be feeling a little “vulnerable”… See the adjacent box for more!

For the moment, happy New Year to all our loyal supporters! May 2013 bring the satisfaction of much intellectual debate.

Barbara K. Altmann

Davis continued from page 1

ancient Amazonian forest dwellers, the engineering feats of the Incas, and Haitian voodoo practices, Davis has come to understand that the genius of humanity is our ability to adapt to seemingly impossible conditions. He believes that we cannot afford to lose any of the skills we have developed over the millennia. Not only would we be impoverished by their loss, we would be more vulnerable.

An ethnographer, writer, photographer, and filmmaker, Davis holds degrees in anthropology and biology and received his Ph.D. in ethnobotany, all from Harvard University. He spent over three years in the Amazon and Andes as a plant explorer, living among fifteen indigenous groups. His work in Haiti investigating folk preparations believed to be used to create zombies led to his book The Serpent and the Rainbow (1986), an international best seller later produced by Universal as a motion picture.


Davis was the series creator, host, and co-writer of Light at the Edge of the World, a four-hour ethnographic documentary series, filmed in Rapa Nui, Tahiti, the Marquesas, Nunuvut, Greenland, Nepal, and Peru.

Davis is the OHC’s 2012–13 Luther S. and Dorothy Cecila Cressman Lecturer in the Humanities. The lecture is free and open to the public and will be followed by a book sale and signing. View live-streaming video at ohc.uoregon.edu. For more information or for disability accommodations (which must be made by February 5th), contact ohc@uoregon.edu or (541) 346-3934.
OHC co-sponsors Eugene Opera’s Dead Man Walking in March

Through our Endowment for Public Outreach in the Arts, Sciences, and Humanities, the Oregon Humanities Center is proud to be a co-sponsor of Eugene Opera’s production of Dead Man Walking. The opera will be staged on Friday, March 15, 2013 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, March 17, 2013 at 2:30 p.m. at the Hult Center for the Performing Arts. These performances mark the Northwest premiere of the opera based on Sister Helen Prejean’s powerful book of the same title.

Since its premiere in 2000, Dead Man Walking, the first collaboration between composer Jake Heggie and librettist Terrence McNally, has become one of the opera world’s most performed new works. It examines the social, spiritual, and political issues and challenges surrounding capital punishment. The libretto illuminates the characters’ emotional journeys, from the unspeakable and inconsolable grief borne by the families of Joseph De Rocher’s victims, to Sister Helen’s own inner struggles and spiritual reckonings.

Dead Man Walking is part of the city-wide 2013 Prisons, Compassion, and Peace Initiative led by Steven Shankman, Professor of English, and the UNESCO Chair for Transcultural Studies, Interreligious Dialogue and Peace. Events include a UO lecture series; the UNESCO-UO international conference “Prisons and Peace”; the Eugene Public Library’s 2013 “Big Read” of the book Dead Man Walking; and appearances by Sister Helen Prejean and Jake Heggie. The Downtown Initiative for Visual Arts and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art will host accompanying art exhibits. See the calendar insert for detailed information about “Prisons, Compassion, and Peace” events.

For more information about the Dead Man Walking opera production visit eugeneopera.com. Tickets are available through the Hult Center, (541) 682-5000.

Sister Helen Prejean