

# Opinion: You always have to be cutting back

By Joe Mathews

She left us only recently, and already San Mateo has gotten way too leafy.

As I drove through that Bay Area city on the way to my grandmother's memorial service this month, the bushes off Hillsdale Boulevard were growing far bushier than they used to dare. The trees along Alameda de las Pulgas flaunted branches that hung much too low. Flowers breathed too easily.



Joe Mathews

Frances Mathews, who passed away a few months short of her 100th birthday, was generous and unthreatening—in almost every respect. She was a loving wife, beloved mother, popular schoolteacher, proud UCLA alum, leader of parenting classes, churchgoer, wearer of the color purple, and such a klutz that her grandchildren called her Grandma Oops.

But, now that she is in a better place outside the reach of California authorities, I can speak frankly: there was a Hyde to this kindly Jekyll.

Grandma Oops was a harsh pruner, unrepentant about cutting back plants to the nub. If a bushy bush were to appear in her line of vision, she would not let it go untrimmed. It never

mattered if the plants were hers, or whether she had any legal sanction to prune. As a boy, I was brought along on pruning raids on Laurel Elementary and Abbott Middle schools, various church gardens, a few street trees, and countless private homes.

The only other Bay Area figure who ever came close to matching her vigilante's passion for mowing down living things was Harold Francis Callahan, the fictional San Francisco cop played by Clint Eastwood in the movies. Grandma Oops and Dirty Harry shared a philosophy: Give an inch to overgrowth or punks, and civilization will teeter.

At my grandmother's memorial service, her friend, the Rev. Kibbie Ruth, observed that pruning was spiritual for my grandmother, a way to get to the core of life. Because, as Grandma Oops wrote in one birthday note to me, "if you don't prune, you can never really grow like you should."

And she erred on the side of pruning more rather than less. Relatives from Los Gatos to Long Beach cried that she had reduced beloved plants to their stubs. She was unapologetic—and for a reason that should resonate statewide.

Cutting back, whether your target is a plant or a government program, is so extremely difficult that one must be a pruning extremist—if you're ever going to overcome the human instinct for hewing to the status quo. California could sure use more of that extremism. Hollywood, in the era of Netflix, is overgrown with too many TV shows we never have time to watch. Silicon Valley is a jungle jammed with pointless startups. Old warehouses across our state have been repurposed as storage facilities, for all the things we Californians won't throw away.

In Sacramento, our state Legislature adds hundreds of new laws a year, and rarely eliminates old ones. Our tax code and budget are incomprehensible thickets of formulas and

exemptions. Our state Constitution, with all its guarantees and mandates, makes thoughtful pruning essentially unconstitutional. One of this year's most important decisions affecting the future of California could be an anticipated state Supreme Court ruling on a challenge to the so-called "California rule," which guarantees that public employees' pensions can never be reduced in any way.

Lack of pruning can have huge costs, and not just in dollars and cents. At the heart of our mounting shortage of housing is thick regulatory overgrowth that makes construction overly time-consuming and expensive.

And it may get even harder to prune properly as our state righteously fights the Trump Administration on multiple fronts. We're so geared up to protect our people and programs that we may have little time or space to jettison those pieces of government we no longer need.

If Grandma Oops is reincarnated, I think she might come back as one of those consultants that rich people now hire to help them figure out how to get rid of their stuff. As she approached the end, I marveled at how she meticulously disposed of almost everything in her small house, leaving only basic furniture and a few photo albums. I wish I had her pruning discipline. Maybe I could figure out how to work less, or to simplify our home life—currently a mad scramble of children's classes, sports, and other commitments.

In her later years, Grandma Oops expressed frustration about one living thing that she couldn't uproot—herself. She had lived too long, she often said, and was using too many of the earth's resources as she hung on past her prime.

I respected her opinion, but I couldn't agree. Sometimes in a family tree, you get one branch so special and enduring that you can hardly bear to see her go.

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