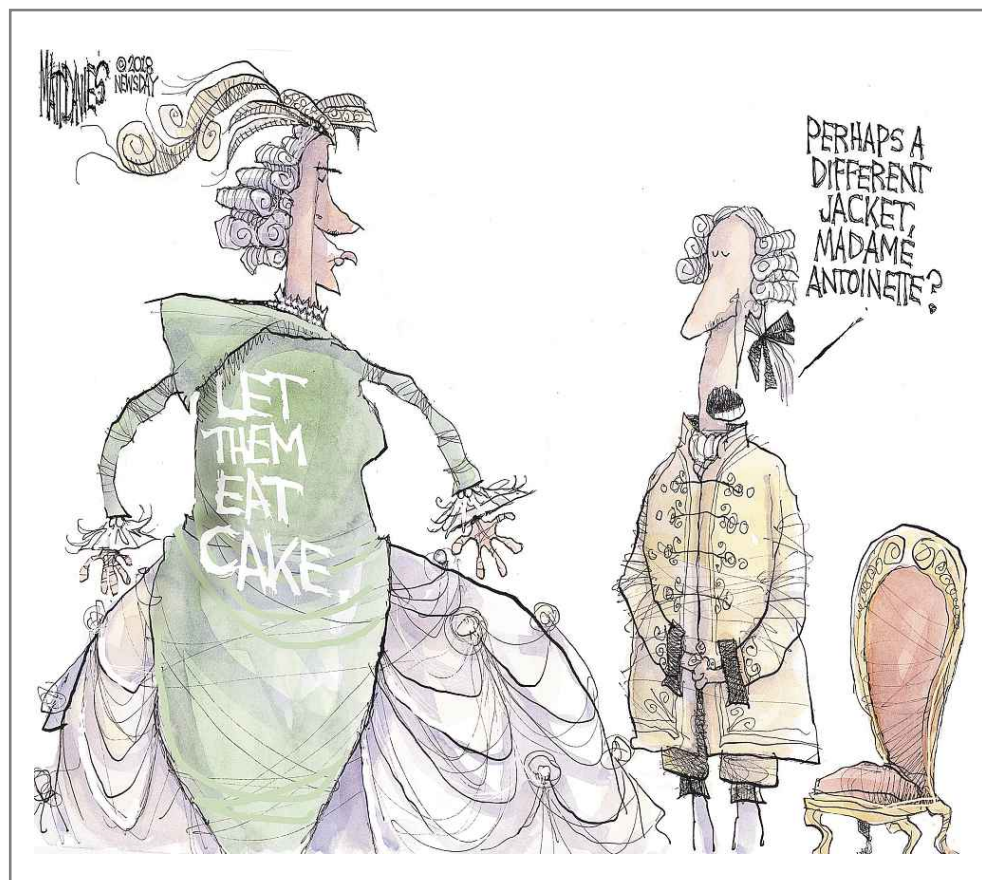


MATT DAVIES



■ See more Matt Davies cartoons: newsday.com/matt

BOTTOM LINES

It is in the interest of the United States and the rest of the world to make sure that space never becomes a war-fighting domain. We can achieve that by continuing to make sure it is neither permissible nor opportune. The next logical step would be to agree that war in space is an international crime.

— PETER WISMER, THE WASHINGTON POST

Scores of cities around the world have programs to reduce homelessness, but pledges to end the problem are dismissed as unrealistic. There's a certain fatalism in public opinion about homelessness: It's right to seek its reduction, but politically acceptable, cost-effective options are limited. That view is increasingly being challenged.

— THERESA RAPHAEL, BLOOMBERG OPINION

As a historian, I have spent 15 years studying power. I have told myself this is a largely intellectual project. But looking deeper — as the events of the past few months have forced all of us to do — I think it is more than that. Trying to figure out how power works, who has it, how they use it and why has been a project of self-preservation, a search for meaning and safety among danger and chaos, and a fight for knowledge and understanding.

— VICTORIA SMOLKIN, THE WASHINGTON POST

■ For full versions of these columns, along with other commentary, editorials and cartoon galleries, go to newsday.com/opinion.

The meaning of Koko's life

This gorilla evoked our sense of wonder at a time when that is harder to do



Michael Dobie

michael.dobie@newsday.com

I don't remember when I first heard about Koko. But my feelings about her never changed.

From the 1970s, when she crashed into our collective consciousness, until the day last week when she died at age 46, Koko evoked wonder.

She was a western lowland gorilla, probably the most famous gorilla in the world. Koko was the gorilla who could talk.

Beginning when she was a year old, Koko began learning a version of American Sign Language for apes. She eventually understood some 2,000 words and was able to speak about 1,000. Her aptitude and cleverness were renowned.

After seeing kittens in some of her favorite books, Koko signed that she wanted a kitten for Christmas in 1983. But she refused to play with the toy stuffed kittens her appeasement-minded caretakers gave her, signing, "Sad."

So Koko got a real one the next year, a tailless kitten named All Ball, and she cared for it as if it were her own baby. She tried to nurse it. She cradled it. She also loved playing with dolls and painting.

I'll leave it to the experts to continue the debate over the degree to which Koko's words came from her, whether she really felt the emotions she signed, the extent to which her caretakers might have tried to provoke certain responses at certain times.

But when All Ball was hit by a car and died, and when staff at Koko's home at the Gorilla Foundation in California told her, and when Koko responded by hunching her shoulders and making a hooting sound gorillas make when they're upset, and when she signed the words "sad," "bad," "frown" and "cry," it wasn't a stretch at all to believe that she really was in mourning.

Around the world, we watched in wonder. For me, and I suspect for many others, it was a genuine wide-eyed childlike sense of wonder. This was apes and humans conversing, in real life, not some motion-picture simulation.

But I do worry sometimes about our collective ability these days to wonder, to be truly amazed, to feel a sense of awe. We're bombarded with stimulation, trained to move quickly from one thing to the next, always multi-tasking, always in sensory overload, prone to utter an empty "wow" to register some surprise and then resume scrolling, without really letting things sink in and allowing ourselves to contemplate the fantastic parts of life.

But then, I wonder a lot.

I wonder when gazing at the sheer physical beauty of so much of our natural landscape. I feel a different sense of wonder when observing the cruelty in some of our political landscape.

I wonder at the breathtaking technological change continuing to sweep our culture — at the rockets that launch into space and return to Earth intact and square on their landing-pad targets, at the warehouse in China that can fill and ship 200,000 orders a day with only four human employees whose job is to service the robots, at the fact that I can order online a timer for our outdoor hoses on a late afternoon on Friday and get it delivered to the house by midafternoon on Saturday.

I wonder at my grandson, and before him my own children, and at the things they say and do and their limitless lust for life.

Part of the wonder aroused by Koko surely came from our eagerness, and astonishment, at seeing something of us in her — empathy, emotion, intelligence, the drive to care, the ability to communicate using language. She was different from us, but we looked for what she had in common with us.

Koko taught us about preconceptions, about the danger of setting limits on others, about achieving beyond what we thought possible. She taught us about accepting others who are different from us.

In the end, for Koko, it was a wonderful life.

Michael Dobie is a member of Newsday's editorial board.