



LOWCOUNTRY MUSINGS

January 2018

A JOURNAL THROUGH TIME

By Florence Bothwell Cosby

Preface

My first Journal was when I was a young girl. It was called a Diary in the parlance of the 1950s and was divided into pages with the date already entered at the top of each one. It was quite small, dark blue leather, and with a tiny key to lock away my secret entries. Not much to be secret about, though. I wrote trivial reports of my day's activities, or lack thereof, and it does not now stand out in my mind as being of any literary significance. I am not even sure what happened to it—probably thrown away with other detritus from my youth.



It wasn't until I was attending an NEH seminar at Syracuse University that I wrote any deep or pondered thoughts in journal format. I had purchased a large, attractive notebook designed for that purpose, with lined blank pages inside and a cover bound with brown and coral marbled paper, reminiscent of the fly leaves in antique books. But I don't deserve credit for its inception, as it was an assignment connected to the research we were pursuing as part of our Fellowship requirements. I remember enjoying the creative involvement that task generated—a quiet opportunity to think and respond. I still have that Journal, here on my bookshelf. It is written in long hand, at a time before a computer as a writing tool ever entered my mind.

Years later, my enforced journal writing returned, again as a required assignment, this time for the several graduate Creative Writing classes I had enrolled in at The Citadel. Our daily journal writing was for the most part directed by a quotation, a theme, a visual response, etc. I still have that Journal as well, in a series of black-and-white Composition books, also in long hand. At the same time, I began the transition to writing on my newly-acquired laptop, purchased especially for use in these classes. It was a major turning point for me as a writer—to use a keyboard to record my thoughts. I liked the speed with which I could keep up with my outpouring of thoughts. As well, I liked the feel of the padded keyboard, the visual ease of the monitor, and the incorporated capability to edit, correct, and proofread as my writing flowed across the page.

But my journal writing ended there, as I began writing longer pieces based on topics of my own choosing, which were then filed in theme-based files and folders on my laptop or PC, rather than in a tangible book designed for that purpose. For some reason, I recently decided that I wanted to begin a designated Journal, a place to record random thoughts and flashes of memory that I would not usually share with another person, mainly because those thoughts are just that, random. My topics would be based on whatever popped into my head, or read in the news, or saw outside my window—images of memory and recollection as I look back on the pages and chapters of my life.

And so, I will become the speaker and my Journal the listener, recorded in the quiet moments I spend with my thoughts and reminiscences. Thus, my Journal journey begins, as a new adventure in writing.



January



*In January it's so nice,
While slipping on the sliding ice,
To sip hot chicken soup with rice.
Sipping once, sipping twice,
Sipping chicken soup with rice.*

Maurice Sendak



New Year's Day

When we were kids growing up on Robinson Avenue, New Year's Day was a quiet affair, given to rest and recovery from the hectic holiday season that had preceded it. But still, no matter what, my mother religiously prepared a festive mid-day dinner to ring in the New Year. In attendance were the usual family members: my parents, brother Jack, Aunt Madeline and Uncle Bob, and cousin Bobby.

My mother cooked the same meal every year and it was always delicious. It remains one of my favorite menus today: roast fresh ham (called boneless pork loin in today's grocery ads), gravy, potatoes roasted with the pork, sauerkraut, peas and carrots, warm spiced applesauce, dinner rolls and butter. My mouth waters with the memory of it all. I think it was the sauerkraut with gravy that was my favorite part, although I am hard put to pick only one—it was the total meal that I remember with relish.

Dinner was served in the dining room, with the dishes from the hutch cabinet, a pattern called Colonial Homestead Green, that I remember my mother buying by the set at Macy's Herald Square. The table

had been from my grandparents' house, and probably dated back to when my mother was a kid herself. It was quite large and comfortably accommodated the seven members of our extended family.



To add to the festivities, we all dressed for dinner, not in a formal manner, but in our Sunday best. It added to the specialness of the day.

One New Year's Day stands out in my mind. We were all seated, waiting for my mother to fill the serving dishes in the kitchen and transport them to the dining room table. We wondered what was taking her so long to finish up the gravy. Then she appeared at the dining room door, decked out in her lovely dress and suede open-toe dress pumps, with splashes and globs of gravy dripping down the front of her skirt and onto her shoes. She paused in the doorway and announced, "Well, there won't be any gravy with this year's dinner!" But she was quite cheerful about her mishap, not in the least permitting a spilled boat of gravy to spoil the festive meal that rang in the New Year.



In our childhood neighborhood, the first weekend in January was devoted to the collecting of discarded Christmas trees that had been abandoned at the curbs for trash pickup. By then the branches were drooping, the color was fading, and the needles were dried and brittle—perfect for our neighborhood bonfire.



We had about a dozen kids on our block who scouted the curbsides for several streets around us, dragging the trees two at a time to the designated drop zone next to Linda and Lois Link's house. Meanwhile, Mr. Link was busy clearing loose debris from the empty lot, with other dads pitching in to make the space large enough to safely burn our bounty of trees. As well, he had hooked up his hose to have on hand in case of a stray spark and for extinguishing the residual embers. As I recall, it was Linda's idea to have our bonfire serve double-duty—as a fun-filled tree disposal activity, and as a ready fire pit to roast potatoes. Wow! We all ran home to grab a spud for the anticipated feast ahead. We wrapped these in aluminum foil and carefully placed them in amongst the edges of the tree pile, to be eaten later when the burning was done. Make that well-done—when I finally uncovered mine from the pile of ash, it was so charred that all I could claim was a ball of coal-black foil, and an unrecognizable nugget of something inedible inside. But in the spirit of our youth, no big deal—we would try again next year.



Ice skating was an integral part of our mid-winter fun when we were growing up in Great Kills. Everyone had skates, most often handed down from an older sibling or part of the family stock of winter sports equipment. My mother did not throw out anything that could be reused, borrowed, or traded. There

was a small utility closet in the corner of the basement where ice skates were hung from pegs on the wall. All you had to do was find a pair in the closest fit, and so on from year to year. I don't think I got a new pair of skates of my own until I was in college and bought them myself.

One of our favorite ice skating arenas was in a flat yard and adjacent grove of trees next to the Links' house on Oakdale Street. Each winter, Mr. Link cut down some saplings, cleared unwanted brush, and etched out a space for his man-made pond, with meandering pathways looping off the back edge. This was filled with his garden hose, which he left lying on the ground until the area was fully flooded and ready for a freeze. It was heaven, right there in our own neighborhood—the envy of kids from blocks around.



At other times, we wandered as a group farther afield to skate on Jack's Pond on the other side of Hillside Terrace. This was a bit of a walk for us on a cold winter day, but well worth the trek for the fun of skating on a larger pond. Occasionally, our parents would plan a trip to Wolfe's Pond off Hylan Blvd. in Prince's Bay. Now that was a grand outing, usually in the daytime since there were not many surrounding homes to offer light. It was a place where you could skate for great distances with lots of unobstructed room for games and speed.

I loved all our skating experiences growing up, as they were in open spaces, free of lanes or directional restrictions, in the fresh icy air, and with friends and family joining in the fun. I did not experience an indoor skating rink until I was an adult, but even then, I never mastered the format of skating around and around in a monotonous circular flow of traffic—somehow it could not compare with the outdoor freedom at our private Magic Kingdom on Oakdale Street.



I was checking the Shopping Carts and Wish Lists on my usual online shopping sites and noticed that most items that are of interest to me are no longer on sale and are back to full price. This surprised me, as I was expecting even deeper discounts and after-holiday clearance prices. I also noticed that the online shipping charges are up to their usual amount--no more deals there either. The push for spending and saving is *before* the holidays, in some cases weeks and even months. And merchandise sells out at a faster rate, so that if you wait too long—too long being into the month of December—then you are out of luck for the sought-after items.



When I was young, merchandise was full price right up until Christmas Day. There was no such thing as Black Friday, and certainly no Cyber Monday. So, the day *after* Christmas was the beginning of the sales, and that was the day when people shopped for bargains. How things have changed.

I especially remember the florist shop Gervasoni's in Santa Barbara in the late 1960s. Each year they erected numerous, maybe as many as eight or ten, fresh Christmas trees, each decorated with

ornaments of a specific theme, such as crystal and silver, wooden toys, natural materials, all blues, etc. It was spectacular, and many people browsed there just for the pure visual pleasure of viewing the awesome tree decorations. But the ornaments at Gervasoni's were very expensive, so on the day *after* Christmas, the traditional sale day back then, all ornaments were half price. Then the store was really packed, with a line of patrons strung out onto the sidewalk waiting their turn to scoop up the beautiful ornaments at bargain prices. We still have a few of those treasures to hang each year on our tree, all these decades later.



January 6 is Epiphany, the Twelfth Day of Christmas, the Feast of the Three Kings, when the Wise Men arrived in Bethlehem to visit the newborn Jesus. When and where I grew up, it was the day when all Christmas decorations had to be taken down and put away, or else bad luck would follow. Here in the south, however, that final day for removal is New Year's Day, but then again folks around here put it all up the day after Thanksgiving, so I guess they've had enough by then.

We had the outside decorations down by the appointed southern deadline, but did not get the remaining pieces put away until today, under the deadline to ward off bad luck. For the month of January, I hang a wreath on the gate that has synthetic ice crystals, more like small nuggets, on the pine branches, and a large silver bow, in time for the wintry weather ahead.



Already today it is cold and gloomy, although the temperature plunge is not expected until tomorrow night. We had to smile at the local weather forecast for "brutally cold" temperatures, probably in the low 20s. Well, having survived temps of 20 *below*, we are not buying into the brutality of it all. Nevertheless, we are glad that we are no longer living in the dreadful winters of the northeast, both in Maine and in New Jersey. In fact, we were saying today that that might be one of the few pluses for living in South Carolina—the absence of *truly* brutally-cold winter weather.



We woke up this morning to a temperature of 24° and the bird bath a solid chunk of ice. The squirrels were not sure what had happened, so they stood on the rim and licked at the ice. The higher-calorie suet feeders were especially backed up with small birds, waiting to stuff themselves against the freezing cold. The feeders have not been this busy in ages.

When I was a kid I remember my mother heating up a kettle of water and trekking out to her birdbath at the far corner of the yard to melt the ice for the birds to drink. She was always very thoughtful about the wildlife she attracted to our yard.



This morning the temperature was below freezing again, 26° for the second night in a row, and forecast into the teens by the weekend. I guess the squirrels must be feeling the chill, because they were busy today insulating their nests. We have at least two, and sometimes three or four, permanent resident

squirrels. They live in the pine trees that border the backyard bird-feeding area, where they benefit from the seeds scattered onto the ground from the multiple feeders. But today their attention was diverted to nest-building activity. They gathered bundles of pine straw from the ground, then scurried up the tree, the straw sticking out of the sides of their mouths, like little medieval thatchers, to disappear into the pine boughs. Two of them, but occasionally a third one, were at it for hours this morning and afternoon. I had never observed that activity in squirrels, but they sure were busy today.



My mother was a devoted squirrel care-giver when we were kids growing up in the house on Robinson Avenue. There was a frame for the trellis that spanned the distance from the edge of the detached garage to the bottom of the dinette window. My mother liked to make toast, spread it with peanut butter, then cut it into small, bite-sized squares, which she carefully arranged outside on the surface of the 2x4 that was the top of the trellis. The squirrels would scamper along the top of the frame from the garage to the window to fetch this delicious treat. If the peanut butter toast was not already out there, they would fling their bodies against the window to alert my mother that she was not moving fast enough in delivering their feast. My mother was so ardent in her feeding of the squirrels that she often gave precedence to them, rather than to her two hungry children, who had to wait their turn to be served breakfast. The squirrels were not as patient as we were to be fed, and my mother happily complied with the squirrels' demands.



One of the first things I do in the morning is browse various online shopping sites for sales and coupon offers. I usually keep a few items in my carts, just for fun. Recently I had been looking for shoes at Macys.com, when I came upon a pair of shoes that harkened back to when I was in first grade at PS#8. OMG! There before me were Miss O'Brien's shoes!

Miss O'Brien was the quintessential old-fashioned grammar school teacher, probably the last of her generation: unmarried, dedicated to her profession, gray-haired bun tightly pulled to the nape of her neck, rimless spectacles, dressed in a dark, no-nonsense rayon dress down to mid-calf, and sturdy, sensible shoes. The kind of shoe that is barely feminine, securely laced, and with a chunky heel. Totally old-fashioned. Or so I thought, until I saw them this morning on the Macy's site.



"A charming vintage silhouette is given modern appeal," boasts the Macy's product details. But if you zoom in for a closer look, it is apparent that a subtle nod has been given to the tastes of a new century of feminist freedom: perforations around the laces that peek in at (gasp!) the bare flesh of the foot—once considered a major taboo for any proper lady—and the option of choosing, not the dowdy regulation black leather, but a *champagne-colored snakeskin-embossed upper*. My oh my, retro shoes in fond memory of the Miss O'Briens of yesteryear.



It seems that National Pie Day is celebrated in January. Just *thinking* about pie brings out the cheerful spirits in me, so today I will happily comply with the occasion and bake a home-made pie for dessert tonight. There are many tasty kinds of pie to choose from, but I will narrow the field to my favorite—cherry pie à la mode.

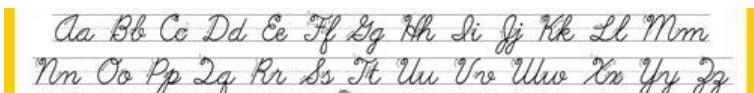


My mother made the best cherry pie. She used a can of Comstock cherry pie filling, which I am happy to report is still available in the grocery store today. In fact, I use it myself, as there is none better. She made her crust from a box mix called *Flako Pie Crust Mix*. It dates to the early 1950s, but is no longer available. It was amazingly good—just add water, mix with a fork, and there you have enough dough for a double pie crust. I remember my mother rolling out the crusts on floured wax paper on the kitchen table, with a rolling pin that had been her mother's, but with only one remaining handle attached to the long wooden cylinder. Nevertheless, my mother deftly wielded it to make a perfect circle of dough to fill her pie plate. Next came the canned filling, and then the intricate top crust. My mother crafted a lattice-work top with decorative strips of dough she had cut with a scalloped pastry wheel. These strips were woven over and under to form the distinctive pattern. She then crimped the edge all around with a fork to hold the crusts together. I used to sit at the table and watch her making this magical pie, thinking she was surely the most talented mother alive. She then baked it to a golden brown, with cherry juices bubbling between the lattice crust, the kitchen filled with the aroma of pastry heaven. My mother liked her slice of cherry pie with a dollop of freshly-whipped cream, but I prefer mine with vanilla ice cream. Oh, so delicious, my mouth waters now, waiting to cut into the one that just came out of my oven.



Also in January is National Handwriting Day. That seems out-of-date to me, as school-age children no longer learn to write in cursive, although they are still taught script (printing) in the early grades. I guess that is still considered *handwriting*, but to me that designation refers to cursive letters.

I remember learning to write in cursive in third grade at PS#8, Mrs. Mahoney's class. Mrs. Mahoney herself had the most amazing handwriting. She had a section of the blackboard devoted to daily information, such as day and date, weather forecast, and ending with her name *Wilma P. Mahoney* written in the most beautiful penmanship imaginable in my young mind. I worked hard to form my own letters with the same care and correctness. To this day, I continue to write in the manner we were taught in her class. Oh yes, there are many times when I scribble a note or list, but when neatness counts, my handwriting is admirably neat and precise.



I am not sure when or where learning cursive was dropped, but these days, the majority of the school day is packed with instruction that is directly driven by the State Standards, and unless it contributes to higher test scores, well, it is stricken from the curriculum. And so, we have legions of students who

cannot write, or read, cursive handwriting—my grandson included. Some classrooms still have those ubiquitous strips of correct letter formation across the top of their modern whiteboards, but it no longer holds an important place in our core curriculum. Poor *Wilma* must be spinning in her grave.



"Have nothing in your house that you do not know to be useful, or believe to be beautiful."
~William Morris

I came across this quotation in something I was reading this morning and looked it up to see its source, context, author, history, etc. William Morris (1834 – 1896) was an English artist, designer, writer, and socialist known for his wallpaper and textile design, fantasy fiction, poetry, and activism. This quotation was part of a lecture he gave to the Birmingham Society of Arts and School of Design in 1880. It is especially meaningful to me because I do not like to be surrounded by clutter or things which I no longer use or like. We frequently declutter our house, designating three categories for purging—Yes, No, and Maybe. The latter is relegated to the garage for a few months, then reassessed; the No pile is either dropped off at the Goodwill, sold on eBay, or thrown directly into the trash. We live with the Yes stuff for a bit, then make the rounds again. We have lived in this house for eleven years now, but during that time our daughter has moved up to Columbia, and our grandson has transitioned to college and a life of his own. So, decluttering was long overdue in our empty nest. We figured if the “kids” didn’t take any of it now, they sure won’t want it later. And so, David and I are left with possessions which aptly fit William Morris’s sentiment—our exclusive reserve of personal stuff that we actively love and use.

Morris’s design for *Trellis* wallpaper, 1862, reminds me of my quilt from the American Folk-Art Museum Collection, *Embroidered Wild Roses*—a beautifully crafted addition to my favorites list.



If you, too, are surrounded by your favorite belongings, whether overloaded or pared down, and if you are a George Carlin comedy fan, then you might enjoy his routine where he talks about his *Stuff*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvgN5gCuLac>



FMC 01/2018

❖ Please check back next month for the *February* entry to this *Journal through Time*. ❖