



LOWCOUNTRY MUSINGS

March 2018

A JOURNAL THROUGH TIME

By Florence Bothwell Cosby

March



It was one of those March days
when the sun shines hot
and the wind blows cold:
when it is summer in the light
and winter in the shade.

Charles Dickens – Great Expectations

Art: Megan Aroon Duncanson – Follow the Wind



March is by far the most beautiful month here in the Lowcountry, as the spring flowers bud and bloom—seemingly overnight. The first arrivals are the jonquils, often seen in the wildlife reserves popping up in glades amongst the still-brown remnants of winter dormancy.



Redbuds are usually the first trees to bloom, followed by magnolia and dogwood, as well as the shrubs forsythia and azalea. Our pink magnolia burst into blossom a couple of weeks ago, and now the Bradford pears are showing signs of renewed life—what is called breaking buds.



The current temperature is 82°, already tying the record high for this day. But these first warm days of March are not to be trusted, as they are often followed by a chilly evening of fierce wind, thunder, lightning, and driving rain—and on occasion even snow or icy hail. These pre-spring storms are usually fast-moving, leaving only a brief accumulation on the vivid blooms of the azaleas. It is truly a time of transition, when Mother Nature is unloading the last of winter's dreariness on top of the more hospitable harbingers of spring.



March 1st seems as good a day as any to hang my spring wreath on the front gate. Why wait until the calendar catches up with the weather?



March 2nd is National Read Across America Day. It is an annual event that is part of the 1998 National Education Association initiative on reading, *Read Across America*. It is celebrated on this date in honor of the birthday of the children's book author, Dr. Seuss. As such, it serves as a motivational and awareness day, when children, young people, and adults in schools throughout the United States recognize the importance of reading every day. In the schools where I have worked, it was mostly the younger grades that showcased the books and characters created by Dr. Seuss, most notably *The Cat in the Hat*. I remember students in those grades dressing up for the occasion, sharing the stories aloud, and acting out their favorite parts. My own favorite Dr. Seuss book from when I was a kid was *The 500 Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins*. I loved it and checked it out from the local library many times.



I made it a practice to read aloud to my students every day, even in the older grades. To me, there was nothing like the shared joy of hearing an author's words spoken, inflected, and toned to the action and adventures encountered by the characters. Perhaps I did this because of my own delight in hearing a story read aloud when I was in grade school myself. My most vivid recollection was from about 6th grade at P. S. 8 when one of our teachers was absent and the Substitute Teacher read to us on each of

those days. She was the mom of one of our older schoolmates and lived a few blocks from the school. We all knew her and how much she enjoyed books, so it was no surprise that when she was the Sub, we would be listening to a selection of stories specially chosen for our enjoyment. It was she who first introduced me to Rudyard Kipling. She read his short stories to us from *The Jungle Book* and brought those settings and characters to life as if we had been transported to that exotic land that could only have been discovered through reading. “Rikki Tikki Tavi,” that feisty little mongoose who bravely fought the intruding cobra to save his human family, has remained one of my favorites and which years later was included on my list of must-reads for my own students. Yes, a shared joy.



I had been wondering how the various National Day designations made it to the Calendar. Well, it seems that they can come from pretty much anywhere. There is a National Day Calendar site which has become “the authoritative source for those fun, unusual and unique National Days.” Located in North Dakota, the site outlines a process for submitting a request for a specific recognition. A committee then meets to evaluate each request, and if it is accepted, then the submitter is notified with a poster-size Proclamation for that celebration. The media are notified as well, and from there the National Day designation is launched into the calendar arena for recognition and celebration. As it says, it is for fun. Several other sites exist that notify readers what Day it is, the history behind the Day, and suggestions for celebratory activities.



With all of that in mind, today is (*drum roll*) National Tartar Sauce Day. Yup, there really is a day for that. Apparently, this designation originated with a request from Frisch’s Big Boy restaurant owners, one of the original fast-food and drive-through restaurants, located in Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana. In 1946, Dave Frisch added a homemade tartar sauce to its double-decker hamburger sandwich, and the tradition began. Since then, the product has been available for sale in Frisch’s Big Boy’s 121 locations.

Eurasian in origin, tartar sauce first appeared in western cookbooks in the mid-1800s. With either mayonnaise or aioli as its base, tartar sauce is like tahini or remoulade, and was traditionally used as a condiment for fried seafood. David makes a delicious tartar sauce, with mayonnaise, green onion, capers, and sweet pickle relish. We will be enjoying it tonight with a fried shrimp, French fries, and coleslaw platter. *Bon Appetit!*



And then there is National Crabmeat Day. Now I don’t have a lot of experience with netting crabs, but the little I have had has been memorable. At one time, we lived on James Island in a house that bordered an expanse of marsh on the edge of a bend in the James Island Creek—a tidal waterway that empties into Charleston Harbor. A long dock spanned the marsh, ending in a railed deck with a ladder to a floating dock below. The deck area provided a perfect location for dropping a crab trap into the depths of the moving creek water. The crabs were usually abundant, and readily entered the trap in search of the bait we had placed inside it.



We often set the trap out to catch crabs for use in a special recipe or dinner plan. I was always the one to crack the crabs and extract the meat, as I am far more patient than David for that sort of task. An especially delicious meal featured crab quesadillas prepared on the old red Weber gas grill. We used a simple filling of the fresh crab meat, Ortega diced chilies, and shredded Monterey Jack cheese, with a side of homemade guacamole. But it was the grilling that topped off the great taste. We ate this sumptuous feast outside on the patio—with cold beer, good friends, and an astonishing sunset. As always, happy days and delicious food.



I received an email from my bank informing me that it was time for my online banking security questions to be updated—an annual event to ensure the protection of my accounts. No problem. The first question option was “Who was your best friend when you were growing up?” Well, that was an easy one... Linda.

Linda Link and I have been friends since my family moved to Robinson Avenue in the winter of 1946. She lived around the corner on Oakdale Street, with the backyard of her house bordering the side fence next to our driveway. But the fence held no barrier for us, as we easily climbed over it to reach each other’s yard and backdoor.



Linda and I went all through school together, from kindergarten to high school graduation. After graduation, she married her boyfriend Took Keiser (THS '57), and within a few years they bought my aunt’s house down the street from us in the same neighborhood where we grew up. They are still there and have raised four children and seven grandchildren. We have remained good friends for all these years, although we have not seen each other in decades. I think the last time I visited her was with my mother in the early 1970s when I was living in California. But we have always exchanged Christmas greetings and have never forgotten each other’s birthday with an e-card. And every time I send or receive an email from her it is as if the time and distance, like that picket fence from our childhood, does not present a barrier to our friendship.



We have always observed Cati’s half birthday—March 16—as a special day, although I don’t recall how or why it started. I was surprised to discover that the term “half birthday” has its own Wikipedia entry, a site on Betty Crocker for party ideas, and several children’s books devoted to the occasion. For each of Cati’s half birthdays, we have given her a package of pink Hostess SnoBalls cupcakes and a Barbie Doll.

When she became too grown-up for the latter, I would send her a photo instead. For example, one year I sent her the Barbie Chef doll in an email greeting.

When Cameron was in middle school, sixth grade as I recall, he had a Physical Science teacher who shared Cati's first name—Catherine with a "C". That year, I was a bit too hasty when I sent off Cati's half-birthday email and clicked on the wrong Catherine. I immediately realized my error and sent a second email to Cameron's teacher explaining what I wrote and apologizing for my mistake in sending it to her. The email had said, "Happy half birthday. I owe you a package of SnoBalls and a Barbie." Within a few minutes, I received an amusing reply from the teacher, stating simply, "Does that mean I don't get any SnoBalls or a Barbie?" I still remember that with a smile.

**Good morning my darling daughter!
And a very happy half birthday to you!**



This is the greeting I sent Cati this morning—with an image of the official 2018 Birthday Barbie. She replied, "I was hoping you would remember lol!!!" Well, how could I ever forget 40 ½.



We have never really *celebrated* St. Patrick's Day, as it has no inherent meaning to our family heritage or upbringing. But as a teacher, I always managed to include shamrocks and a bit of green into our day, and there was usually someone's mom who brought in festive cupcakes or cookies. I do remember going to Wal-Mart with Cameron when he was a little guy and buying him a very gaudy, shiny green necklace with a shamrock hanging from beads to wear to school. It was fun. But we never attended a parade or a wildly drunken gathering at a local bar, pub, or restaurant such as Tommy Condon's here in Charleston, for which the entire block is cordoned off to provide a safe space for the overflow of celebrators. Again, all in fun.

When we lived in New Jersey, the Town Pub in Bloomfield was our annual go-to restaurant for their all-you-can-eat St. Patrick's Day dinner. We had enjoyed many meals there over the years with our New Jersey family. The restaurant's usual fare was, and still is, Italian cuisine—great pizza and pasta dishes. So, the St. Patrick's Day meal was a bit of a departure for them. But not the décor. The Town Pub was known for its over-the-top decorations for whatever the holiday happened to be. Not an inch of wall, ceiling, or air space in the restaurant, banquet room, or bar was left unadorned. For the most part, the decorations were the gaudy kind you get in dollar stores, and a good thing, too, because I am sure that they spent many dollars, as well as hours of taping and tacking, to achieve their famous level of lavish embellishment.



In more recent years, here in the Lowcountry, our usual plan has been to prepare a corned beef dinner at home for St. Patrick's Day—referred to in recipe books as a New England Boiled Dinner—and boiled it is, but delicious just the same. We also bake an Irish soda bread, based on a recipe from a former teacher colleague in New Jersey, and which remains the best of all the Irish soda bread recipes we have tried. And that is what we will be doing later today. No fancy decorations on the wall, no shiny green beads draped around our necks, just delicious food with an Irish flair.



My granddog Roxi is four-years-old this month and has been with Cati more than half of her young life. She was a rescue dog, found wandering around, lost, hungry, uncared for, and frightened. She had no microchip, and no one came looking for her. Cati had recently lost a dog she loved—a sudden and unexpected loss which left her devastated with grief and resigned that she would not, could not, ever have another dog again. But her Animal Shelter friends introduced her to Roxi, who was very much in need of a loving home, just as Cati needed a loving best friend. The match was made in heaven.



Cati has sent me so many photos of Roxi that I don't save all of them anymore, just my favorites. And every day there is a funny Roxi-story for her to tell. To say that Roxi is heart-warming is a huge understatement. She is family. When she visits us, she has her own routine, and of course we follow her lead. For starters, she gets her two licks of Cool Whip, which is kept on hand in the fridge just for her. At her own home, Roxi has many favorite possessions, such as her chenille throw, decorative pillows, soft squeaky toys, and treats that she hides for later enjoyment. So, Happy Birthday little Roxi. You have brought such joy into all our lives.



The vernal equinox for the Northern Hemisphere occurs on March 20th at 12:15 p.m. EDT. Also called the spring equinox, it represents the moment in time, not a day-long event, when the sun stands directly above the equator and day and night are approximately the same length. So now spring has officially arrived, even though it has felt spring-like for several weeks now. Spring foliage comes early to the Lowcountry and is pretty much the same from year to year, with a few spikes of unusually vivid color.

The most spectacular onset of spring is what I have seen in recent photos of the California desert, especially Anza-Borrego Desert State Park. Every decade or so there is an abundance of winter rain and snow in the high altitudes, which in turn creates a “super bloom” of the desert wildflowers.



We were fortunate to be in Santa Barbara when there was a super bloom in Happy Canyon in Santa Ynez at the foothills of the Los Padres National Forest. That was more than 40 years ago, when there was easy access to the area. The year of the super bloom drew many sightseers to view the spectacular wildflowers, especially the poppies, as far as the eye could see through the valley and into the hills beyond. It was breathtaking, so stunning that we gave up taking photos, as no picture could capture the awesome display of Mother Nature at her superlative best. We have kept those images in our mind's eye from an unforgettable experience. We have also traveled to the Anza-Borrego Desert State Park to explore the many wonders of the desert—its flowers, insects, birds, and mammals. It is astonishing to realize how much life exists in what is at first glance a desolate area. Not a day goes by that we don't miss California—Santa Barbara, Carpinteria, Los Angeles, and of course the amazingly beautiful desert.



The wisteria vines are usually the last of the spring blooms to appear here in Summerville. The wild ones are huge, hanging off the tallest trees along the roadsides. I did not realize that they grew in the wild until we moved down here. Cati has a vast expanse of wisteria growing across the bushes and trees in the ravine behind her apartment in Columbia. It is quite a dramatic view, especially the other week when the snow showers fell against the backdrop of spring wisteria. My mother had an ornamental wisteria that she planted next to the back porch of our house on Robinson Avenue. She trained it up a trellis and across an arbor that covered the porch. The vine grew noticeably each year, dangling its colorful, fragrant clusters of blossom.



When we lived in New Jersey decades ago, we used to regularly visit the Metropolitan Museum of Art, often meeting David there after his work day. He would walk up from 44th Street, and Cati and I would take the subway to The MET. Our meeting place inside the museum was the American Wing, which grandly features Louis Comfort Tiffany's impressive stained-glass windows. Our favorite was the one with the hanging wisteria, reminiscent of the vine my mother grew in the garden of my childhood home. One year for Christmas, David gave me a miniature—about a foot square—replica of the window, which we have since hung in a place of prime viewing in our homes here in the Lowcountry. Where it hangs in this house, it is backlit by a glass-block window. The opalescent colors are rich and true to life, creating a mini garden that we view each day with pleasure. What is particularly artistic to me is that the undulations of the glass-block surface reflect the colors from the yard outside, which in turn resemble the shapes of the leaves and blossoms of the stained-glass wisteria. I continue to delight in the wisteria window, and the memories it evokes of my childhood, playing on the back porch under the fragrant shade of my mother's wisteria vine.



David made home-baked waffles for breakfast today, one of our favorite morning menu items. Ages ago we used a recipe from the 1965 *Better Homes and Gardens New Cook Book* called "Oh Boy" Waffles, but in recent years we have decided that Aunt Jemima does an exemplary job of shortening the preparation process. We have two waffle irons—a large one that yields four waffles with standard-size indentations

on its grid, and another one that produces two Belgian waffles with larger indentations. We save that one for special brunches and for occasions when we have breakfast for dinner or with a cheese sauce.

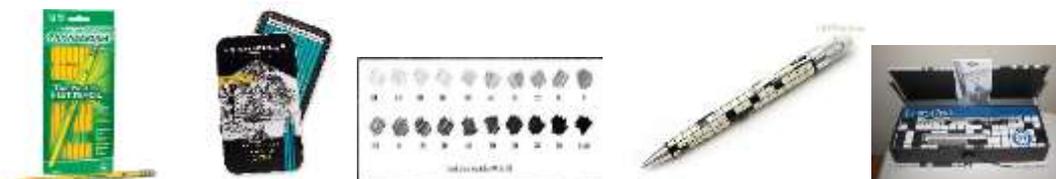


When I was a kid, my mother did not make waffles, although she had her mother’s waffle iron stored in the depths of a kitchen cupboard, on the bottom, in the far corner, never to be used. But she did buy me Downyflake Frozen Waffles when they came on the market in 1953. They were advertised as “no batter no bother” and “Just pop Downyflake waffles in your toaster and serve with Log Cabin syrup.” Well, my mother did not use Log Cabin syrup for pancakes or waffles; instead she used Karo dark corn syrup, which was thick and bitter and not at all complimentary to my Downyflake waffles. But waffles they were, and they were a treat for me as a kid. That was probably the first in a now-extensive market of toaster-ready breakfast foods. When Cameron was growing up, we did have toaster foods and Eggo waffles on hand as an easy breakfast for him, but not so much since he has moved on into his adult life.

A popular dish here in the south is chicken and waffles, part of the local Gullah soul food tradition. Although the combination has been on the American culinary scene since the early 1800s, it was not mentioned in regional cookbooks until much later. My daughter Cati is an Executive Chef at an upscale restaurant in Columbia and digs deep into the local culture to revive and update well-known fare. She recently created a festive menu item combination that pulls out all the stops for waffle-eating delight—*Fried Lobster Tails and Waffles with Sweet Corn and Red Pepper Gravy and Candied Cajun Bacon Garnish*. Even Aunt Jemima would be asking for seconds.



National Pencil Day is a celebration I can really get into. I love pencils, and, like other pencil lovers, I have my favorites. Thomas Edison preferred pencils made by Eagle Pencil. Vincent Van Gogh used only Faber pencils. Writers such as Roald Dahl, John Steinbeck, and Vladimir Nabokov used only pencils when penning (ha, ha) their books. Dahl started each writing day with six sharpened pencils and re-sharpened them only when all of them were no longer usable. Steinbeck was an obsessive pencil user and is reputed to have used as many as 60 pencils a day, and more than 300 pencils when writing *East of Eden*. Ernest Hemingway once remarked, “Wearing down seven number-two pencils is a good day’s work.” When he was satisfied with the handwritten draft, he would then switch to his typewriter.



My favorite pencils include the #2 HB Dixon Ticonderoga, the yellow ones with the distinctive green ferrule, because they are strong, sturdy, with a good eraser, and sharpen into a nice, neat point. Ticonderoga claims to be “The World’s BEST PENCIL” and I agree. They have been in business for over

100 years, maintaining their standard of high quality. I keep several of these pencils on each of my work spaces and replace them as their erasers become worn or they are too short to handle comfortably.

For art projects, I prefer Turquoise graphite drawing pencils, which I began using when I was in art school at Syracuse University. I still have many of those original pencils from more than 50 years ago, as well as new ones I have added over time. They come in a range of grades from hard (9H) to versatile (HB) to soft (9B). I continue to use these pencils for my own artwork, as well as when I was teaching the value scale to middle school art classes.

For working the Sunday crossword, I have a special pencil that David gave me for Christmas more than ten years ago. It is a *Retro 51 Tornado Crossword Mechanical Pencil*, with a crossword graphic decorating it. It is by far the most wonderful surprise gift I have ever received and remains today as one of my three favorite pencils.



National Manatee Appreciation Day falls on the final Wednesday in March. For real. There is no known origin for the day, but the manatees are certainly worthy of celebration and appreciation. They are large, gentle mammals with no known natural enemies, but which are negatively impacted by the loss of their habitats. They are migratory mammals and can be found in Florida in the winter and as far north as Virginia in the summer. They live for about 60 years, and spend most of their time eating, sleeping, and traveling their migratory pattern. They prefer coastal areas, including bays, rivers, canals, and estuaries.



When Cati was about seven-years-old, we traveled to Florida to visit my brother Jack. We did a lot of touristy things, including visiting a manatee feeding location. It was not a commercial area that charged an entrance fee or sported a refreshment stand and souvenir shop—it was manatees in their natural habitat doing what they like best, eating and hanging out. The place was near a water filtration station—a large facility that released warm, clean water back into the surrounding sea water near the coastal shore. Although the manatees are herbivores, they were pleased to accept our offering of saltine cracker bits. We got to feed them right from a dock deck, which enabled us to observe them up close, within a few feet of our hands. Also called sea cows, manatees are so ugly they are cute. It was an exciting experience for us, and especially for our then-young daughter. But I know that our manatee visit remains vivid in her memory, so I sent her a greeting today: *Happy Manatee Appreciation Day!*



Also occurring this month is National Single Parent Day, signed and declared by then-President Ronald Reagan in 1984. It was “created to honor and recognize the hard work, devotion and sacrifices of single parenting.” My daughter Cati is a single parent. Although she has had us to help her through the years of raising Cameron, she has not had the father of her child at her side to share the challenges of child-rearing. When Cati first told us she was pregnant, she knew that the father would not be in the picture. But we decided, as a family, that her child would be born and cared for as best we could manage. She

named him after David's middle name and gave him her own last name, so that they would always be bonded by Cosby family ties.



While Cati was in college, she was Vice President of the Single Parents' Club and helped befriend and mentor other moms like herself who were putting themselves through college while juggling the busy schedule of student, part-time worker, and parent. During those college years, she and Cameron moved in with us, until she was able for them to live on their own. Even then, she and Cameron lived close by, so that she could work the hours necessary for pursuing her career as a chef. When he was old enough, Cameron came to school with me in North Charleston and attended his early school grades in the same building where I worked. In later years, Cati enrolled him in the local school here in Summerville. She got him up, ready, and off to school, then David met him later at the bus stop and provided the after-school care until she returned home again. For Cameron's high school football team's Parent Appreciation Day, David proudly stood with Cameron to honor his Mom—a small word that speaks volumes for how she has raised a fine young man as a single parent.

Anita Renfroe is a comedian from Atlanta, Georgia. She came into the entertainment spotlight after the posting on YouTube of *The Mom Song* – a comic rendition of everything a mom typically tells her children while they are growing up, compacted into a 3-minute song and set to the tune of the *William Tell Overture*. There are several versions of her Momisms, but this one includes captioned lyrics.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DHPuU9w5iQo>



As weather lore goes, March comes in like a lion and goes out like a lamb. We learned that bit of folk wisdom when we were little kids, and it certainly seemed true in the northeast, where it was still winter at the beginning of the month, and into spring by the end of the month. But even here in the Lowcountry, our weather in early March had dips of cold temperatures, even some flurries and hail, and today as the month comes to a colorful close, it is heading towards a forecast high of 84°.



Briton Rivière, *Una and the Lion*



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🐾 Please check back next month for the *April* entry to this *Journal through Time*.