

Reflections

Written by Jack Sparacino

Tuesday, 19 November 2013 14:49 - Last Updated Wednesday, 20 November 2013 08:51



Imagine a fellow who's been lucky enough to have received a good education while living in nine states and to have held truly interesting jobs. Imagine him taking a deep breath and sitting back down at his laptop. He just reached a milestone of sorts, column #25 for *Lowcountry Weekly*, and it seemed like a good time to reflect on the past few years and where the always enjoyable writing process has led and vice versa. And yes these destinations have included a rabbit hole or two!

First of all, my sincerest thanks go to Margaret and Jeff Evans for offering me a seat at their hospitable publishing table. And perhaps especially for allowing me to sometimes wander nearly off the reservation in terms of addressing—or not—explicitly Lowcountry subjects. Clamming and growing Meyer lemons here seemed on the basic radar screen, even my Newtown piece since we are all affected by the tragic deaths of our nation's children.

But in writing about a grab bag of other subjects such as the art of worrying, our subjective sense of the passage of time, amazing everyday phenomena, the role of rescues in our lives and the unspeakable horrors and distinctly American heroism that colored World War II, for example, I took a little poetic license perhaps. Thank you again, Margaret (I often like to call her MP for Madam President since she calls the editorial shots), for letting me float off out of the marsh sometimes.

I would also like to thank the Lowcountry readers who took the time to offer me feedback on this column. Great thanks are due to some terrific writers, including Kim Cross, editor-at-large at

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Southern Living magazine; preeminent Shakespearian scholar and memoirist Alvin Kernan; award winning naval historian James Hornfischer; and my wonderful friend James Scott, another award winner and for my money, one of the absolutely finest WWII storytellers in the business.

For a lifetime avid reader like myself, writing for Lowcountry Weekly is a wonderful additional excuse for digging into books and other background materials that I find fascinating; I always hope that our readers will, too. This year alone, and just counting books, I read over 10,000 pages. Talk about a labor of love!

"The Old Perffessor," Yankee manager Casey Stengel, once said "Alright everyone, line up alphabetically according to your height." That's about how my office library is organized. And by subject area. I like to keep the biographies together, maybe in the mystical hope that when I'm not in the room the subjects will take time to mingle and come up with some really cool inventions. Crime thrillers are also together, with John Sandford and John Grisham front and center. But mostly I collect American history books and in the past several years have finally gotten a handle on how our country got to where it is today. This after taking largely dismal if not dyspeptic history classes in school, the kind focused myopically on dates, treaties, legislation and superficial coverage of obligatory figures and events. Yaaaaawwwnnn.

No event, I believe, was bigger than World War II and my collection of related books is becoming extensive. One quickly learns that this is the war that changed everything people care about, and had it turned out differently . . . had we and our allies lost . . . our world today would surely be miserable and inhumane.

In a flash of good news, I came to realize that some, probably most of the very best writers who concentrate on this war are relatively young—several generations removed from the soldiers, sailors and airmen who fought so titanically for our freedoms and the cavalcade of Rosie (and Rickey) the Riveters who kept them so well supplied (making, for example, a staggering 300,000 warplanes, 107,000 tanks, and 56 million grenades during the war). These writers include Rick Atkinson, Laura Hillenbrand, James Hornfischer, James Scott, Ian Toll and Mitchell Zuckoff.

These remarkable people continue to reveal deeply inspiring stories and create savage theater out of the accelerating inferno that raged between 1939 and 1945. They also teach us, as Atkinson points out in "The Guns At Last Light" (Henry Holt, 2013), that we more than landed on our collective feet after Japan finally surrendered. "The United States emerged from World War II with extraordinary advantages that would ensure prosperity for decades: an intact, thriving industrial base; a population relatively unscarred by war; cheap energy; two-third's of the world's

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gold supply; and great optimism."

That nearly unbounded optimism has of course taken its lumps recently, especially after the devastating recession that began in December 2007 and lasted 18 months officially but for many Americans is still roiling like a case of malaria. And, of course, as a result of a can't-get-there-from-here U.S. Congress whose approval ratings barely reach 10% (gee, who are those people?). Not to mention the ghastly funeral procession of public shootings and bombings, which can leave the impression that no school, airport or even marathon run is really, reliably, honestly-you-can-relax-about-it, safe.

Such gloomy musings seldom inspire me to get back to my keyboard and I continue to try to remain optimistic. "How Can That Be?" was penned in that spirit, as was "The Best We Ever Had" and "Sounds of Freedom." Interestingly, one of my good friends in effect wagged his finger at me and good naturedly challenged my optimism, pointing to many of the things that remain broken in our country.

He certainly made some fair points, in a Facebook forum no less, but I think it's also fair to push back. There really are some pretty good reasons to remain optimistic and proud of our country while not necessarily drinking one's own bath water, as it were. Writing in The Wall Street Journal, for instance, Bret Stephens noted that "Anyone who thinks America's best days are behind us should take a look at the Nobel Prize haul." Just in 2013, Americans won nine Nobels. This compares to China's nine total, as in ever.

And how about this: since 2000, Americans have won 18 of the 33 prizes for medicine, 21 out of 37 for physics, 22 of 33 for chemistry and a bone crushing 27 out of 30 economics prizes. We can also take credit for winning baseball's fall classic every year. Take that, world! As The Week magazine put it recently, "Our politics may be a mess, but the heart of American greatness beats on."

I hope to be lucky enough to have another 25 Lowcountry columns in me. Sometimes just finding the next one seems a challenge, especially one that might stimulate some thought, raise a worthwhile question, maybe just generate a smile or a head nod or two. But for me this isn't a matter of counting, enumerating or even listing. It's a question of having the opportunity to share and engage, examine and clarify, or just think out loud.

That's it, think. We Lowcountry types are lucky that way. We are surrounded by nature's bounty and beauty and share a priceless heritage with wonderful neighbors. There's quite a lot to think

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about, a lot to reflect on. I'm just trying to keep one of the lights on. Thank you so much, Margaret and Jeff, and thank you Beaufort.