

Milestones

Written by Jack Sparacino

Tuesday, 21 April 2015 13:53 - Last Updated Friday, 24 April 2015 16:14



Let's see if we road warriors of life have this straight. According to vocabulary.com, "*Milestone* literally refers to a roadside marker that lists the distance to a particular location.

These days, the word is more often used figuratively to refer to significant events in life... It acts sort of like the road sign: it's often a moment when you reflect on where you stand in life." As I so reflect here on Saint Patrick's Day, a frequent occasion for good cheer, it seems fitting to look cheerfully at some significant markers in my life, all of which are happening nearly at once. So " Sláinte mhaith" (good health as the Irish might offer in a toast) to all of us as we take notice of life's important occasions.

10 years in the South. Having searched far and wide for a great place to retire after living most of our lives in the Northeast and Midwest with stints in southern California, we took the advice of old friends who'd moved to Okatie from Greenwich, CT and explored the Beaufort area closely. We soon had a winner and moved south from Newtown in 2005. The differences presented by lovely southern living quickly became as clear as sweet tea (without the actual tea part) and we have reveled in them ever since. Some of my favorites include:

- *Local language details.* *IN-sur-ance*, for example, as lifetimes outside the south would seldom bring such accentuation to one's ears. And
what to do about signs that read
"gumbo... hot dogs... pies."
(Except pull over and get some.)
Gee,

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I thought you spelled jumbo with a “j”!
IN-deed.

- *Sweetie for all.* The first time I spoke with our new bankers it was over the phone from my office in Stratford, maybe an hour from Hartford (yes, famous for its INsurance companies). A pleasant woman manager--a complete stranger -- called me “sweetie.” (Not “sweet tea,” right?) Huh. A non-event down here, but a hen’s tooth in New England. I was pleasantly floored.

- *Pickup trucks grow on trees?* Well, we certainly had these vehicles up north and my fishing buddies and I used them regularly on our weekend trips. But as Jane and I settled into Beaufort County, it seemed like pickups were as plentiful as, well, camellia blossoms and pretty churches. Muzbe a lotta haulin’ goin’ on down heah. We got enough bait, Donny?

- *Politeness- and friendliness- in the drinking water.* I’m not sure I’d ever been called “sir” before, at least not by grownups, but down here people are just plain more polite and helpful than almost anywhere else, and this is particularly noticeable with strangers. Maria at the Lady’s Island Publix, quite voluntarily, escorted me all the way from seafood to the bakery when I asked her about muffins on my first trip to the store. She finished up with an effervescent description of each type of muffin they carried. This three minutes is etched in, well, tabby in my mind. And one can’t forget receiving friendly smiles and hellos from people you’ve never seen before. Imagine that, Yankees!

- *Where taxes go to die.* We now pay nearly 90% less in property taxes. Far as I can tell, taxes are pretty nearly a bad word among many southerners; unlike, of course, the essential things like road maintenance that they are usually spent on.

- *Cornbread as a vegetable, main course or dessert.* Well not quite, but for those of us who love cornbread, it’s nice to know that it’s seldom more than 20 feet away. And there must be nearly 20 “best” ways to fix it, not that it’s really ever broken.

- *Fall in the spring.* By now, it’s clearly not my imagination... leaves flutter to earth in the fall, of course, but also in the spring and... could it be... in the summer and winter to some extent. I’ve grown to love our leaf blower, previously seen mainly as a possible hair dryer for horses.

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50 Lowcountry Weekly columns. From “Clamonomics” in March, 2011, to “Scooting Off To Work” on the joys of job interviewing a few weeks ago. Upon reaching #25, “Reflections,” the prospect of 75 more or even 25 seemed a long way off, not really in terms of time but in that many more organized ideas. Writing for Margaret and Jeff Evans and of course our many readers has been a joy, one reinforced regularly through supportive comments and notes from near (next door, down the street, Charleston) and far (Washington state, New Mexico, Minnesota, New England). My goal has always been to continue to enjoy the writing process itself but far more importantly, to share experiences, facts and viewpoints that somehow, if sometimes only briefly, illuminate, entertain, maybe even educate. Thank you all for your kind, and frankly in some cases *too kind, encouraging words.*

Do I have a favorite among the 50? Usually it's the last one off my keyboard, though a tribute to the “greatest generation” remains high on the list. They were indeed “The Best We Ever Had.” And why we're all here in mostly one piece.

Reaching Medicare age. Gulp. This one really gives me pause and I bet I'm not alone. In many ways I was incredibly fortunate, born into a warm, energetic, upwardly mobile family in Queens, NY, in 1950. America remained flush and vital from its titanic victory in WWII, our democracy and manufacturing might were unexcelled, our colleges and universities the finest. The horrors of polio were finally about to succumb to modern medicine's relentless advances. An average house cost \$14,500; gas to drive home was 20 cents a gallon, a loaf of bread 14 cents.

Hungry from shopping? A ham salad sandwich went for 30 cents at F.W. Woolworth's, the popular five and dime stores, and you could treat yourself to a “super jumbo” (there's that word again!) banana split there for 39 cents. Harry Truman established a solid presidency after an incredible run by FDR and life for most Americans was good to great. We were the champs.

So no complaints from me. Well, sure, I could really do without the painful arthritis, and I'd do anything to have my father back with us. But how in the heck did 65 years fly by so fast? Seeing “The Theory of Everything” featuring Eddie Redmayne's moving portrayal of mega-genius physicist Stephen Hawking as he battles ALS can give one a fuller appreciation of the meaning of time. And being able to control one's own body. Maybe that's what much of reaching 65 and sliding into the Medicare system is all about... control. And anticipating the future.

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I do believe that the best is yet to be. The strangulating gridlock in Washington? Well, it can't possibly last very much longer, can it? And Gideon Lichfield writes convincingly in the current issue of *The Atlantic* magazine that there may indeed be—maybe, eventually, at least—an airtight scientific basis for believing in an incredible afterlife.

One which will have to, of course, include plenty of cornbread, sweetie. And jumbo... ah, make that gumbo. Even a retiring columnist can work up a serious appetite down here.

Sláinte mhaith!

Jack Sparacino earned a Ph.D. in psychology from The University of Chicago and later worked as a post-doctoral research fellow at Ohio State University in the business school. He is retired from United Technologies Corporation, Sikorsky Aircraft division and lives with his wife Jane and their two Yorkies on Saint Helena Island. He tries his best to catch a lot of fish, especially when sons Jack and Greg visit, stay off ladders, read only great books and write clearly. Sometimes he succeeds.