



The third week of April, I was writing a story with a day or two left before deadline. Plenty of time, as long as I kept tapping those laptop keys. The weather was luscious. Seems that last rain washed out a good deal of the excessive pollen that our Lowcountry humidity had trapped in its sticky molecules. The sun shone warm and bright; fat, opalescent clouds skittered across a powdery blue background, temps hovered in the low 70s, and a soft breeze whispered just enough to keep tiny, bitey insects at bay.

Nature beckoned, but proud of my professional discipline, I kept on with the matter at hand. Years ago in a terrific travel-writing workshop, Nick Flynn, the editor of the *San Francisco Examiner* 's travel section, delivered a sound byte that has become a career mantra for me. "Editors want deadlines met, not excuses."

My first paid job as a writer was penning *Lexington*(Kentucky) *Herald-Leader* book reviews that were always due on Monday. Once, when I'd read the book but had procrastinated writing the review until a Saturday prior, a tainted bowl of seafood chowder blessed me with a nasty case of food poisoning. Once my system cleared, I slept, and by the time I finally awoke, I was horrified to discover that Sunday had passed without my knowledge and Monday had dawned. I had to write the entire review when still feeling awful.

So on this recent, glorious day, my outdoor stroll could wait until late afternoon, when I'd at least have a good first story draft. So proclaimed the rational voice from within. As I tap-tapped away, the article began to shape up. Until early afternoon, when a sound from outside caught my attention. An avowed airplane nut, I quickly identified the buzz coming from the sky. Almost immediately a loud *whoosh* passed over my house, then another.

Racing out to my porch, I saw a flash of navy blue and goldenrod above. The U.S. Navy's Blue

Angels were in town practicing for the MCAS Beaufort Air Show. I'm always completely captivated by those sleek, blue-and-yellow F/A-18 Hornets and can't keep my eyes from searching the sky for another glimpse. When one appeared, I gasped. My heart leaped. I did a happy dance. All this before remembering my laudable work ethic. *Shoot!!* I thought. *Get back in the house, sit yourself in the chair, and write. You'll see them on Saturday.*

That worked for about 10 minutes. After hearing numerous more passes, I succumbed, grabbed my walking shoes, hat and sunscreen, and hit the Spanish Moss Trail, where the Angels zoomed overhead. Several folks were taking photos from a bridge that afforded a wide view over the water. I chatted with a guy who'd biked to the spot on his lunch hour, trying to snap photos of those speedy craft with his cell phone. Though the time had come to return to work, he didn't want to leave our private air show. I felt the same.

It's the BSO syndrome. No, not the Beaufort Symphony Orchestra – though their music always gives an uplifting charge – but the ever-distracting Bright Shiny Object affliction. You know, when you're absorbed in one thing – a project, or person, or conversation, or story – and all at once out of the blue, something steals your attention. It always happens fast. Getting back to your original focus is usually difficult because this new direction seems somehow completely riveting and all-consuming. Middle Age Crazy is a good example. Don't need to explain that.

Like my father before me, I have scads of interests. Because the world is a marvelous treasure house of intriguing people, places, ideas and experiences, some new BSO is always coming down the pike. Daily, if you're awake and aware... or easily distracted. Watch a four-year-old tearing into a stack of presents on Christmas morning. Kids have it down to an art.

Several years ago, I had the joy of witnessing this phenomenon in action when a friend invited me to a holiday gift-opening for her four-year-old granddaughter and cousin the same age. Dressed in frilly, bow-bedecked, red-and-green Christmas frocks, the girls were adorable. Until they attacked their gifts. Like little hurricanes gobbling trees in their paths, they would grab a gift, rip off its wrapping and utter amazingly high-decibel squeals, look to the next package, i.e. BSO, and repeat the procedure. In eight minutes only multicolored mountains of tissue, bows and brand new, primary-colored toys remained. The girls were playing outside with the dog.

As I have no children, I was breathless with awe due to the rapidity with which the girls re-focused on the next wonderful thing. But also because I realized that the BSO syndrome is not age-specific. I have it myself, as witnessed by those Angels luring me from work. Don't get

me wrong. I don't regret having zipped outside and answered their call and would do it again in a heartbeat. After all, they don't fly over often and "all work and no play" leads to an unbalanced life.

Sometimes, however, work projects that put bucks in the family coffers, household chores, overdue correspondences, assigned homework, home maintenance tasks, regular exercise, daily journaling, meal prep, overgrown lawns, and tangled gardens must be attended to. Not to mention volunteer commitments. I hear many retired folks swear they weren't nearly as busy when all they had to do was raise a family and go to work every day. "My plate is way too full," they complain. "How in the world do I get off the gerbil wheel?"

Wish I didn't understand that particular dilemma. It's called over commitment and its causes are myriad. A psychologist could have a field day. As my college degree is but a BS in Animal Science, I'll proffer a bit of wisdom learned from living on the Earth for a while.

One cause of filling your calendar way past healthy is to please others, or even to prove your value to others. Another can be to pump yourself up by giving to others. Another might be the martyr syndrome, sacrificing for others. Admittedly, mine is wanting to do as close to *everything* as possible. Or at least try. It's all about time, and the fact of only 24 hours in a day, eight or so of which are devoted to snoozing.

Lately, I've been trying a new tack – prioritizing my commitments. And this seems to be working somewhat as long as I "keep it simple," another of those remarkably on-target, 12-step memes. What has helped me as much as anything is the awareness that time is rockin' on daily and that there are things I still want to experience, friends I want to spend more time with, stories I still want to write. Merely thinking about these brings a smile. I used to believe that doing for others was the best anyone could accomplish in a life. Now I know that comes with a caveat. Doing for others is wonderful as long as you feed your own heart first. That's the balance. You can't love others fully until you love yourself, fill your own emotional tank.

That's a message straight from the angels... both kinds!

As I love colors and writing, my plan is elementary. It may or may not work for you, but might

be worth a try. Write the things that fill your days on a big piece of paper, in random order, not in a list. Scatter them across the page, each in its own colored circle. On another page do the same with things that fill you with joy, especially those you don't ever seem to get around to doing. Without using the term "vision board," cut out each circle and attach only the ones that make you smile to a cork board or white board. Now look at them carefully, taking deep, slow breaths and letting your mind play with the possibilities.