



By Margaret Evans, Editor

The last time I wrote about a virus, it was the [stomach bug](#) that took down my entire extended family (and our friends) a few holiday seasons ago. Happily, I had a different kind of viral experience this Christmas.

While riding home to Alabama last week, I was playing on my phone – How did we do long trips before smart phones? (and before husbands who like driving in the rain?) — and as I scrolled through my newsfeed on Facebook, I saw that a complete stranger (from Louisiana, I think?) had posted an article from my blog.

That's right. I have a blog. You probably didn't know that; most people don't. I created it about a year and ½ ago, when it became increasingly clear that some of my writing is simply inappropriate for *Lowcountry Weekly*. (No, my blog is not an “adult” website. Get your mind out of the gutter!) I wanted a place to expand my “repertoire.” I guess I'd also hoped to expand my readership beyond Beaufort County, but that had never really panned out.

Anyway, here was an article from my humble, unassuming, *practically secret* blog – the one nobody knows about – on the Facebook page of a total stranger. It wasn't the first time, but it doesn't happen much. Flattered and curious, I clicked on the link, which took me straight to my blog. And what I discovered there was this: Over 3000 people had clicked on the same article that day, and it wasn't even noon yet.

Huh? *How could this be?* When I post an article from my blog on Facebook, I'm happy if 100 people read it. Seriously, 100 is a great number for me on my blog. And this particular article – called [“Prodigal Daughter”](#) — had already had its heyday, or so I thought, garnering over 300 reads when I first posted it back in October.

But now here it was again, risen from the dead. “Prodigal Daughter” was back, with a whole new lease on life. Somebody kill the fatted calf! As we made our way toward Alabama, I checked my blog stats every hour or so, and was amazed to find my article spreading across social media like wildfire. By 2 pm it had had over 5000 hits, and by the time we reached my parents’ house that evening, it was over 8000. It topped out that night at just over 10,000 hits, and when I woke the next morning, I found that over 4,000 people had read the article while I slept. By the end of that second day, almost 30,000 people had clicked on my article, and by the time the virus started to peter out, right around Christmas Day, the number had reached over 40,000. To put this all in perspective, that’s about 39,900 more people than typically read any given article on my blog.

This is what they call “going viral.” And I’m here to tell you, it’s a lot more fun than the Festival of Widespread Vomiting I chronicled on this page a few years ago.

But even this virus had its downside. As my blog stats climbed higher and higher, so did my obsession with them. Like some dead-eyed teenager at the mall, I couldn’t extract my face from my phone. And, as my readership grew exponentially, so did my expectations. I got greedy. While 3000 hits had seemed miraculous that first morning, by the next morning, that number sounded rather lame to my ears. After my readers soared to almost 20,000 the second day, I found myself disappointed with the mere 9,674 readers I had on the third day. (Hello? That’s 9,574 more readers than usual!)

In my own defense, I was well aware of my shabby behavior and flushed with shame even as I pawed at my various electronic devices like Pavlov’s dog. Whether reading on my Kindle, working on my laptop, or texting/talking on my phone, my blog stats were never more than a few clicks away, and click away I did. I hated myself for it, but I couldn’t stop!

I confessed my shame to my little sister – who also happens to be the designer and webmaster of my blog – and she had mercy on my poor, ego-twisted soul. “You *should* be checking your stats,” she told me. “Every time they go up, it means you’re touching more hearts.”

God bless that girl. She gets me. She perfectly distilled that bittersweet cocktail of self-consciousness, deep neediness, and blubbery love that drives me to the keyboard day after day. I literally crave connection . . . I yearn to collide with other human souls on a level not

easily reached through everyday interaction. That's what keeps me writing.

And checking my stats. 'Cause the more soul collisions, the better.

Folks around the family homestead at Christmas were happy for me. (When I wasn't being a stats-obsessed bore, that is. Wine helped.) They said things like, "That's great! What are you gonna do now?" and, "Well, I hope it does you some good," and, "Are you going to start selling ads on your blog?" and, "How can you parlay this into a successful business?" All of those questions were relevant and even important, I suppose, but for me, it was all about the soul collisions. To quote everybody's favorite chain-wielding, moralizing Christmas ghost, "Business?! Mankind was my business!"

So, when I wasn't checking my stats, I was reading my comments. There were lots and lots of comments. Now's the time I should probably tell you that "Prodigal Daughter" is an essay I wrote for *State of the Heart: South Carolina Writers on the Places they Love*, which was published in October by USC Press. I chose the choir loft at First Presbyterian Church as 'the place I love,' and wrote about my return to the Christian faith – by way of music – almost a decade ago. Apparently, this is a topic that resonates with all sorts of people – the faithful, the fallen away, the just-plain-fallen, and especially the choral singers – and I'm pretty sure the fact that the essay resurfaced just before Christmas explains why it went viral now and not before. Nobody was thinking about this stuff back in October.

Though everyone was generally receptive to the essay, the comment section broke down into a couple of different "types": Those who related to my story and/or wanted to share their own . . . and those who felt compelled to instruct me toward a righter relationship with the Almighty. In the piece, I was pretty honest about my struggle with belief – a struggle that plagues me to this day. That confession didn't sit well with a few of my readers, and they responded with comments that felt patronizing and preachy. Those comments were edifying, but perhaps not in the way they were intended to be. (Note to self: Don't be patronizing and preachy.)

A reader named Clint delighted me with a long, gorgeous comment that began: "What a lovely article. Pay no attention to these self-centered pietists who want to satisfy themselves that you're believing and thinking exactly what they think you need to believe and think. Let the voices of the saints draw you nearer to the mystery that is God, let them speak and sing to you across the centuries, and as you join your voice with theirs, float upon that great sea of faith, sailing onward till you're welcomed Home. Maybe today you believe it all, maybe tomorrow you

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don't, but ruminations about the Invisible pale to just trusting that God has done what is needful to bring you to 'him'self..."

Other readers confessed their own struggles with belief, reminisced about their childhood churches, waxed poetic over sacred music, or just said "thanks for sharing." They all seemed grateful to have a forum for this discussion. One woman wrote, simply, "You've told my story."

For me, as a writer, there is no higher compliment. There's no greater satisfaction than knowing I've told your story . . . which is also my story. And no matter how many readers I have (or how few), the relationship between reader and writer is always personal. Forever one on one. Soul to soul.

But I do hope to go viral again someday. I've got the bug.

Margaret Evans is the editor of Lowcountry Weekly. Read more of her Rants & Raves [here](#), or visit her blog at www.memargaret.com