

Getting By with a Little Help from My Friends

Written by

For the first time this year, I went kayaking. It was Father's Day and I put in on Lucy Creek just off of Sams Point Road. I was by myself but I wasn't alone. I counted eight dolphins on that solitary expedition; two of them were a mother and her calf swimming side by side, heading toward the marsh grasses to feed on fish they would corral. It was a calm, dusty gray morning and the brackish water flowing around the kayak made a soft whirl as it brushed against the boat's polyethylene skin, filling the creek with a high tide. The backdrop of the gray-white sky highlighted the vivid green of our new summer cord grass.



I lost a good friend in May. Aldo "Bart" Bartolini. Bart lingered in his dying with congestive heart failure and an unspoken mission to reunite with his wife Helen who he had lost over a decade ago. Bart was one of my very first Beaufort friends. Just last year, I lost my very first lowcountry friend. Alice was the owner of the First Stop Bait Shop in Lobeco; an inconspicuous hole-in-the-wall plopped down beside the marshes of the Whale Branch River.

I met Bart while attending morning Mass at St. Peter's. It took a little while for us to warm up to one another. I'd show up early once in awhile before church would open and he'd already be there, standing outside the doorway, puffing on a cigar and complaining that he couldn't sit down and get started on his morning prayers. I told him he could always start saying his prayers outside but that wasn't the right answer. He had his prayers to say and he wanted to sit down in church to say them. When the deacon unlocked the doors, Bart would stash his cigar in the planter on the left hand side of the doorway, retrieving it when he exited, saying his goodbyes to fellow parishioners awake to a new day and refreshed in spirit. As I left and headed toward my car, we'd stop and chat for a while to share stories. Actually, he'd share and I'd listen to tales about the Marine Corps, his wife Helen and daughter Mary Helen, his yard work and the neighbor dogs he'd care for on occasion. His consistent message was that married men need to appreciate their wives, kiss them every day and tell them how much they loved them. You never know when they'd be gone. Then, he'd give me two kisses. You need one for each cheek he'd say. He was right on all counts and I already miss him, his kisses and the repeated advice.

I didn't travel much in June. The month was a little rough on my mom health wise and although she's fine (snoring in the Best Western bed next to mine before we start Day Two of our road trip north to Pennsylvania), her minor setbacks resulted in a cancellation of a business/personal trip for me. I took advantage of my time at home by enjoying my lunch breaks in the backyard. Sometimes, I take the comics page from the Beaufort Gazette with me for light, lunchtime entertainment. Levity is a great break from the daily Email jungle and I happen to like Dilbert, Non Sequitur and Get Fuzzy, in contrast to the myriad of complaints received by the Gazette's Managing Editor about the changes to our local comics.

I could do without any reading, as my backyard sometimes seems like a live presentation of pages from the National Geographic. While sitting there, a hummingbird will visit my new yellow and red polka dotted feeder from Lowe's. The tiny bird dive bombs the feeder, descending like a Marine jet over my head. During my recent lunch date with nature, I watched a red-tailed

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hawk nail a squirrel as a skink looked on, lounging in the summer sun atop my deck's railing. Buntings visit my birdfeeder with their noisy chickadee colleagues. Lady's Island is the first place I saw a Painted Bunting and the green, hot pink and purple blue feathers that decorate the bird are amazing. Some bug that looks like half of a leaf rounds out the woodland show. In the quiet of a warm afternoon, as humming birds sip red, sugary juice from a contrived blossom, the wind pushes through the elliptical leaves of live oaks like a whispered prayer. The little visits from wildlife let me know I am not alone as quiet sunshine filters through the humid shadows.

On a recent car ride, just before the McTeer Bridge reopened to the hallelujahs of full capacity, I crawled along behind the wheel of my Ford 500 in the slow movement of traffic across the Woods Bridge. The delays provided time to look out at our beautiful Beaufort River in my never-ending quest to spot dolphin. Listening to tunes transmitted by the Sirius satellite orbiting somewhere above planet Earth, the Beatles came on the 60's station singing "Help!" As the Fab Four reminded me that when I was younger "I never needed anybody's help in anyway," they also confided that those days are gone and "I'm not so self assured," that I need help opening up doors. Guess what? I get it. Bart and Alice did that for me. Dolphins and hummingbirds help me to see past myself. Caring for another person pushes me through doors with invisible locks to fight the daily battles of self-knowledge I'd rather not win.

When I paddled and drifted in the rising tide at dawn on Father's Day, I was alone with my thoughts until a dolphin swam toward me and dove underneath my kayak. The intensity of that moment raised the hair on my arms and my heart skipped a beat. I wanted to be in the water with dolphins that morning and I got my wish. And in that quiet, under the watchful eye of a mother osprey, I believe I heard my Father's voice urging me not to be afraid.