

The Bigger They Are

Written by Margaret Evans



By the time you read this column, I may very well regret having written it. Our deadline constraints require that I finish “Rants & Raves” nearly a week before it’s published, and with our 24 hour news cycle, a week might as well be a year.

In a week, new details emerge... facts change... opinions change... heck, my mood changes. It’s just crazy taking on any topic that’s time-sensitive, right? Right. And yet, like Mark Sanford at an AP press conference, I am strangely compelled to share my deepest thoughts, right here, right now, ‘letting the chips fall where they may.’ So I implore you, dear reader, to view these lowly paragraphs as nothing more than a passing impression – just one woman’s incomplete musings based on what she knew and thought and felt at a particular moment in time.

And now that my derriere’s ever-so-slightly covered, let us proceed...

I had planned to write about our modern day obsession with celebrity. But after the past two weeks, I find I am no longer *remotely* obsessed with celebrity. In fact, I am just the opposite. I am bored with celebrity. I am bored with *celebrities*. Yes, even the dead ones.

But there is one celebrity story I just can’t get enough of – our homegrown one, the aforementioned Mark Sanford Saga. I find it endlessly fascinating. As I write this, Sanford is still our governor; by the time you read it, he may not be. And frankly, that’s beside the point. The man has fallen, and fallen hard, and it’s been an astounding thing to witness. A riveting morality play that just keeps unfolding. A slow-mo implosion from which it’s impossible to look away.

But why? We Americans are used to this sort of thing, right? By now, we’re fairly desensitized to politicians and their confessions of infidelity. We can even recite, by heart, the responses they’ll

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elicit. We'll hear a lot about "hypocrisy," especially if said politician is a 'family values' man. We'll read lots of enlightened comments beginning with "I don't care what he does in his private life, but ..." If the politician is a professing Christian, we'll hear him called "self-righteous" and "holier-than-thou," which is the price one pays, nowadays, for publicly espousing a high code of moral conduct, anyway, whether one hews to that code or not. This is all pretty predictable, and the scenario usually plays itself out in a day or two, then we find something new to chatter about. The Senator Ensign incident a couple of weeks ago, for instance, was merely a passing fancy... (What was his first name, again?)

So what makes the Sanford story different? Why are people still talking about it as if it were on par, interest-wise, with the paternity of Michael Jackson's kids? This beleaguered southern governor has turned us into a nation of amateur political strategists, armchair psychologists, street corner marriage counselors, backseat spiritual advisors, and makeshift moralists. What makes his story so compelling?

While following Sanford's travails over the past week, a phrase kept rattling around in my head: Greek Tragedy. A term from my long-ago, far-away, English Majory past, I wasn't sure why it kept coming back to me, or even if I knew exactly what it meant. So I did what any erudite, self-respecting Woman of Letters would do – I asked The Google. Here's what that all-knowing oracle revealed to me, by way of Wikipedia:

"The philosopher Aristotle said in his work *Poetics* that tragedy is characterized by seriousness and dignity, involving a great person who experiences a reversal of fortune. Aristotle's definition can include a change of fortune from bad to good, as in the *Eumenides*, but he says that the change from good to bad, as in *Oedipus Rex*, is preferable because this effects pity and fear within the spectators. This reversal of fortune must be caused by the tragic hero's *hamartia*, which is often mistranslated as a character flaw, but is more correctly translated as a mistake. Tragedy results in a catharsis (emotional cleansing) or healing for the audience through their experience of these emotions in response to the suffering of the characters in the drama."

Aha! Now we were getting somewhere. This was Greek Tragedy, without the togas. I thought about my own reaction to Sanford's initial press conference, the one in which he confessed, "I've been unfaithful to my wife." Though branded a "meltdown" and a "train wreck" by plenty of pundits, Sanford's confession had a very different effect on others, and definitely on me. I remember sitting there gripping my chair, glued to the TV, a lump in my throat and tears in my eyes. "No, Mark, no!" I whispered at the screen, as his revelation unfolded. I don't even know the man, but I was riveted. Devastated. And, frankly, I was in shock. This was like no political press conference I'd ever seen. It was unscripted, unrehearsed, disorganized and disjointed. He wasn't slick and, despite what some have claimed, he wasn't sanctimonious. Here was a powerful man – a man of authority and influence – humbled, ashamed, broken. The emotion was raw, palpable. It was difficult to watch such naked, fumbling sincerity, accustomed, as we are, to faux remorse, elegant excuse-making, and polished euphemism. It was literally painful to witness such pain, embarrassing to witness such embarrassment. I felt for Mark Sanford. I felt for his family. I felt for his mistress. I felt for myself, and for you, and for all of us.

This, I think, is what "catharsis" is all about. And Mark Sanford gave us a good one, by God.

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Was it good for his political career? The “experts” assure us that it wasn’t, and I can only agree with them. But it was good for his soul. And it was good for my soul. And, unless you are among the tragically hip or eternally cynical, I’m willing to bet it was good for yours, too... even if you wish, as I do, that he’d zipped his lip after that.

So I come not to bury Governor Sanford *or* to praise him. His fall – partly because it was from so high a perch – has been iconic and profound... yet, so very normal and human. And that, I believe, is why we’re hooked on this story. Because it’s ours. We have all been caught in the whirling, crazy-making grip of infatuation; we’ve all known the thrill of seeing ourselves, rejuvenated, through the eyes of a shiny new lover; we long-time marrieds are all-too-familiar with the daily challenges of the institution; we parents all know the heartbreak of failing to live up to our children’s idealized versions of us; no matter how small and unimportant our jobs, we all know the longing to escape the responsibilities and banalities they entail.

We may not know these things on as grand a scale as Mark Sanford now does, but we know them. And if we’re honest with ourselves, we know Mark Sanford. We *are* Mark Sanford.

And that, again, is why we care about this story. Not because the governor abandoned his post for five days – I know we like to *say* that’s why, but I don’t believe it – and not because he’s a ‘family values’ guy who got caught cheating on his wife – as we’ve established, that’s old hat now – but because

this time, the politician was honest with us, excruciatingly honest, and we recognized ourselves in him, and thought “There but for the grace of God...”

Mark Sanford screwed up, big time. No way around that. He betrayed his family, he betrayed his party, he betrayed his reform movement, and he betrayed his state. If he hasn’t done so already, he should probably step down.

But his open-wounded sincerity... his obvious ache of shame... his unchecked compulsion to confess more than we want to hear... his unwillingness to dehumanize his mistress with denials and callous references to “that woman”... his awkward, desperate grappling for spiritual redemption...? These are not among his flaws. They may be unfortunate traits in a political leader, but they are not unfortunate traits in a man. They both fascinate and repel us only because they are so rare in modern American politics. Let’s not be so quick to dismiss Governor Mark Sanford with our jokes and our scorn. We’re not likely to look on his kind again.

And in some ways, I think that's too bad.