



By Margaret Evans, Editor

Fifteen years, y'all. I've been writing this column every two weeks for fifteen years. Since the turn of the century. Before I had my baby (now 13), or my house (also long in the tooth), or either of my cats (ditto), I had this column. That's something, isn't it? I don't know what, exactly. But something.

Though it's in my nature to feel like a permanent interloper, always a bit like the "new girl," it occurs to me that I've been in Beaufort for a good, long, time now. Not "my family came over with Jean Ribault" long, but long enough to see a fair amount of transformation. I remember when the Old Bull Tavern was Breakwater (and before that, the Bistro DeJung) and when Q was Gatsby's (before it became Ollie's). I remember the great Bay Street Trading Co.—before Will Balk, Jr. became a *Lowcountry Weekly* garden columnist – and the way folks lined up for blocks to have Pat Conroy sign a book there. I remember City Councilman Stephen Murray as a high school kid doing Shakespeare in the park. I remember the Old Bay Marketplace before you could party on the rooftop and Fordham Market when it was Fordham Hardware.

Who says nothing ever changes in a small southern town?

Since I started writing this column, USCB has become a four-year-college and developed a thriving Center for the Arts. Since I started writing this column, Beaufort got it's own International Film Festival, now heading into its 9th year. Since I started writing this column, MCAS was awarded the F-35 and Port Royal built the Cypress Wetlands Trail. The street got 'scaped (twice, I think) and Waterfront Park got a swanky makeover. Since I started writing this column, Dick Stewart built... a lot.

If I keep listing changes, somebody's pet metamorphosis will be left off the list and feelings will be hurt, so I'll stop. But you get my drift.

I like it that Beaufort's always shifting and stretching, rearranging and refurbishing . . . while never losing its essential character: Historic Southern Town on the Water. Always romancing the new, always revering the old. In that way, Beaufort is a good place for someone like me – someone who needs to feel her roots running deep and holding fast even as her branches reach and extend . . . someone who often feels older than the Angel Oak and younger than its greenest acorn, simultaneously.

You who have read this column faithfully for lo these many years – and I know there are a few of you, because you tell me – feel like dear friends. You've been with me through a large chunk of my awkward stage – or "life," as I call it. You've seen me through pregnancy and parenthood, political confusion and religious conversion, elation and depression and all the fluctuations in between. You've laughed with me, cried with me, put up with my mood swings and shared your own. You've stopped me on the street to say 'hey,' emailed me personal notes to say 'me, too!', sent me beautiful handwritten letters, commented on my website and my blog and my Facebook page. In real life, I'm homebody-ish, and actually somewhat shy. (It's true! Southern girls learn to fake "social" from birth.) This column has always been my way of "reaching out," as they say . . . and many of you have reached back. Thank you.

I know I drive a lot of you crazy. My progressive readers can't understand why a "smart" woman like me doesn't go all in for the cause . . . why I'm skeptical of causes in general . . . why I maintain respect – and even affection – for folks on "the wrong side of history." (Hint: I don't believe there's such a thing. I see history as a tide that ebbs and flows, not a tidy before-and-after picture.) My conservative readers often feel I've been hoodwinked, duped, by some irrational utopianism or New Age paganism. I write about message-bearing birds and secret-telling butterflies, even as I extol family values and old-time religion. Back and forth I go, always seeking balance, chasing the truth I tend to find in the center . . . or, even more often, in paradox. And you know what? It's all me. It really is. I believe in all of it.

You can do that, you know? You don't always have to pick a side. Literal or Figurative. Reason or Emotion. Science or Religion. You don't always have to vote the "straight ticket" in this life. Sometimes, it can be both/and instead of either/or. Other times, of course, you have to make a choice. For times like that – true forks in the road – I've developed a motto (or mantra, if you prefer); I say it to myself, over and over, repeating it like a mystical charm:

Follow the love.

Sounds simplistic, doesn't it? A bit childish and silly? Hippie-dippie in the extreme? In reality, this rule of thumb will complicate every decision you ever make. Because here's the thing: There's not a political party or a religion or a social movement on earth that has a monopoly on Love. Nor is there a political party or a religion or a social movement on earth that's immune from all the human failings that thwart and distort Love. Love animates every ideology and every institution we human beings ever got our well-meaning, grubby little hands on. But so does its opposite. And sometimes, they're hard to tell apart. Especially when looking in the mirror.

Following the love is not so much about judging others and their motivations (always a mixed bag), as about looking at *yourself*, hoping *your* heart's in the right place, then proceeding forward on Love's behalf . . . with as much humility as you can muster. (Because you might be wrong.) "This action might make me *feel good*. . . but will it actually *do* good?" I'll ask myself. "Will it serve the cause of Love?" The answer isn't always as clear as I'd like, but the more I ask, the clearer it becomes. From the Bible to the Beatles, Love seems to be the thing. Follow it, and you're likely to be on the right path. But it might not be the path you expected.

Speaking of which . . . this column sure did veer off its original path, which was rather indistinct to begin with. But that's me for ya. Fifteen years I've been meandering over this page. Fifteen years I've been falling back and springing forward, changing and staying the same, trying to follow the love. Thanks for sticking with me.

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