



By Margaret Evans, Editor

It's Friday morning and deadline day for this sprawling thing I euphemistically call my column. It's also the second day of spring – March 21st – and all of creation has risen to the occasion. Outside my window, the "we need you, we need you" bird has returned to seduce me from my grim task. (My old pal Jim Tatum tells me that's the cry of the Carolina wren, and I have no reason to doubt him.)

I call my task "grim" because I'm fresh out of ideas. The well has run dry. I'm a opinionator without an opinion. And you know what? I don't even care. If I didn't have this blank page to fill, it wouldn't matter a lick. Ideas schmideas – that's how I'm feeling at the moment.

What does an opinion columnist – someone who traffics in ideas – do when she's not only out of ideas, but has lost faith in the very *idea* of ideas?

She starts by answering the call of the "we need you, we need you" bird. Sweatshirt, scarf, some running shoes . . . and your wayward columnist is out the door. . .

There's Adelaide's garden at the end of my street (the "Secret Garden," my daughter and I call it), just coming into its springtime glory. Camellias, azaleas and other flamboyant blooms spill over the weathered lattice brick wall. Soon the dogwoods will open. Enchanting . . .

I walk on, sifting through a list ideas in my head, mentally scanning last night's news, the morning paper, my Facebook feed . . .

Tom Davis' anti-Obamacare bill was voted down by the SC Senate a couple of days ago. I've long since given up trying to untangle the Byzantine economics of Obamacare, and my friend Senator Davis is much smarter than I am about this kind of thing. I know he worked hard to pass this bill, that he believes strongly in the ideas behind it. I also know that my family – and many other families – can finally afford decent health insurance thanks to Obamacare, so I have mixed emotions. The economic principles behind Obamacare seem unworkable to me over the long haul. But as Mark Twain once wrote, "Principles have no real force except when one is well-fed." Ditto for "well-doctored," I guess . . .

I keep walking . . . I'm past the Secret Garden now and onto Lafayette. Is it ever gorgeous out here! The "we need you, we need you" bird has been joined by a full-throated avian chorus, the

wind is whipping, leaves are raining down from the sky, and the air is golden. Somewhere, a wind chime sounds its haunting music, and everything feels a little Middle Earth here in Pigeon Point . . .

But I have to keep shuffling ideas; need something to write about. I've been writing this column for almost fifteen years, and it's always been about ideas – most of them interesting (to me, anyway), many of them wrong-headed (it seems to me, now), some of them right-headed (I think?), all of them sincerely examined. At least, I thought so. But who knows? Maybe there were times when I got too caught up in cleverness. Maybe sometimes I was deceived, or even self-deceived. Maybe I came upon an idea so dashing, so new and exciting – or old and venerable – that I got sucked in too easily, just couldn't resist its dazzle. I'm very impressionable; that's something I've learned in these 15 years of columnizing. I'm a sucker for a well-turned phrase and I adore a custom-made argument. But just because an idea is articulated with aplomb doesn't mean it's a good idea. Does it? I don't trust ideas like I used to . . .

A national writer I know posted something on *Politico* this morning about Rand Paul and America's "Libertarian Moment," arguing that Americans think they like libertarianism . . . but don't really. It's a brilliant column full of big ideas. But, as I've said, I am a little burned out on ideas at the moment. A bit wary, disillusioned. Even a little bored. I can't muster up a strong opinion about libertarianism. I'm neither for it nor agin' it. It sounds good in principle, but would it really work? Communism sounds good in principle, too. I'm beginning to think most ideas seem sensible – even admirable – when they're beautifully expressed. But of course, that's just another idea. Take it with a grain of salt . . .

So now, I'm on Park Street, working up a sweat . . . The live oaks that were gutted a few years back, to make way for the power lines, are starting to look like trees again. You can't keep a good tree down . . .

Still walking and thinking . . . What else are people talking about out there? This week I've read articles about the death of Fred Phelps (should Christians mourn or celebrate?), the abortion rights movement (are those coat hanger pendants powerful or distasteful?), various Lenten practices (should we give something up or take something up?), and Paul Ryan's speech about the culture of poverty (is he racist or merely right?). I've read umpteen articles on Common Core from several different points of view and ditto for Obamacare. I know what the Keynesians think, and the Austrian Schoolers, and everybody in between. I've been all in with Chris Hayes, have chugged my *Morning Joe*, have digested my *National Review*.

And it's all a bit of a blur.

Sometimes, I think I'll just stop paying attention to ideas altogether. Just leave them alone. Those folks who do seem so much happier and more peaceful than I. They have long since settled down with their politics or their religion or their governing philosophy or what have you, and they're comfortable there. They have a solid foundation and it holds them steady.

But not me. Just when I start getting comfy – just when I think, "This is it! Finally!" – another pretty idea comes along and turns my head and I have to follow it where it leads. I may end up dumping it – I'm getting better at that – but I can't resist the thrill of the chase . . . the initial allure of a new perspective . . .

At least, that's how it's been for the longest time. But lately . . . lately . . .

Ideas have become such an *industry* these days. And that industry churns out its product with such shameless, promiscuous abandon, I seem to be losing my taste for it. (The same thing has happened with potato chips, now that they have all those crazy new flavors. "Chicken &

Waffles"? Really, Lays?) The big challenge is that I'm
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of that industry. I, too, am an idea vender. I must consume to produce, but more and more, it just seems pointless. Much like an hour on the treadmill, opinion journalism raises the heart rate, but it never really gets you anywhere. St. Paul told us that prophecies would cease, that tongues would be stilled, that knowledge would pass away. Love is the final word – this we all believe – so why must we keep blathering on about everything else under the sun?

Eleanor Roosevelt famously claimed that small minds discuss people, average minds discuss events, and great minds discuss ideas. What does it mean when an idea person, someone who never had much interest in discussing the first two subjects, loses interest in discussing the third, as well? Does it mean her mind is now *surpassing* greatness? I think not. I have a feeling it means she really needs a break . . . a mental palate cleanser. Or maybe just a hobby . . .

The "we need you, we need you" bird is calling me as I turn the corner back toward my street. Spring is all around me, with its bright blossoms and falling leaves and fresh, audacious bluster. My brain is tired but my body feels stronger with every step. I think I'll run the rest of the way home, maybe plant some flowers when I get there. In fact, maybe this is the year I'll finally get serious about gardening . . .

Now there's an idea . . .

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