**Showcasing the DNR: Of spring and April showers**

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The jagged seam stitching along the edge of the pillow has loosened.

It won’t be long now before stuffing will begin to fall, in increasingly larger chunks of duff, twisting and turning in its tumbling, landing softly on the hardwood floor so dusty after a long, cold winter’s time.

Such is the nature of the arrival of spring – in dribs and drabs at first, then more and more until seemingly, suddenly, it’s already here in full bloom.

Whether it’s snowing outside or not, some of the spring birds – whose migrations are triggered by lengthening days – are now back in the area. Red-winged blackbirds, robins, sandhill cranes, woodcocks, kestrels and geese are among these early arrivals – perhaps to be surprised by a white welcome.

Maple trees are dripping their sap, weasels and hares have begun changing from their wintry white coats back to their darker spring and summer fur fashions. It won’t be long before the wood frogs – which can stand to freeze and still survive – will begin their clucking spring songs.

They may already be out there talking into the cold spring winds, from a spot where the sunshine melted away the ice over the shallow water in the corner of some backwoods swamp.

Not far behind them will be the spring peepers, a small woodland frog with the mark of a cross on its back. In large numbers, especially in confined areas, these frogs united can produce a deafening evening chorus of song.

And so it goes throughout the spring into the early summer, as the temperature rises, each of the various frog and toad species of the region are triggered to begin singing.

For me, spring has provided some good memories over the years to help carry me forward. However, much of this realization has been produced in hindsight, with the benefit of more than a little soaking in a thick gruel of introspection.

When I was a kid, spring meant getting outside as much as possible and pursuing all those fun activities prevented by months of wintertime.

These pursuits included getting down to the lake to wade in the water among the reeds to look for frogs and turtles, playing whiffle ball in the backyard, climbing trees, riding and jumping bikes, building forts and swinging and singing on the playground equipment not far beyond our back-porch steps.

I have an April birthday and as such, a lot of things about spring I associate with that day. For example, in most years, the snow is usually gone by my birthday.

Another one of those associations is that Major League Baseball season usually starts about a week before my birthday. Baseball is one of those things I have always loved.

It’s a sport my dad and I could watch together and enjoy. However, I was no good at sports beyond the backyard. I wasn’t ever going to be any Catfish Hunter or Mark “the bird” Fidrych, much less Hank Aaron or Harmon Killebrew.

This proved to be a big disappointment to my dad, who had been an exceptional hardball player. At one point, he even held professional aspirations before he and my mom got married.

When I washed out of Little League tryouts, our evenings playing catch together in the backyard ended.

That’s not to say I couldn’t throw. I could skip rocks or toss a stone a long distance out into a quiet lake or pond to hear the sound and watch the ripples it made in the water, bubbles churning up to the surface from the lake bottom.

My younger brother, on the other hand, was athletic. But I remember him trying to skip a rock on one of our family lake outings and getting hit in the back of the head.

It’s all trade-offs. Right?

I tried to even the baseball score with my dad when I lived in California. When he came to visit one summer, I got the two of us fabulous seats along the first base line to watch the Tigers play the California Angels.

I remember it was the first major league game he had seen in person. Of the seats he said, “You have to watch out we don’t get one in the puss sitting here.” Translation: he liked the seats.

After the game, they turned all the lights in the stadium out for a lengthy July fireworks display. My dad said it was the best fireworks show he’d ever seen. He also complimented my ability to easily travel the Los Angeles freeway system.

Another trade-off.

Years later, I had the opportunity to work as a reporter and photographer for The Mining Journal in Marquette – the newspaper my dad read every day without fail. It was one of my proudest days being able to tell him I got that job.

It was kind of a vindication that I could do meaningful things off the baseball diamond.

Today, he’s been dead more than 10 years and I’m still writing.

When I was a news writer, I used to wonder why my dad, like many other newspaper readers, read the obituaries first. Older now, I don’t wonder anymore.

Springtime in my childhood also meant getting distracted by water. For some reason, whether it was playing with the garden hose, fishing – which I did since I was 3 years old – or sneaking off down to the lake, I have always had a big attraction to water.

I remember being a little guy, outside on recess at the old brownstone Grammar School. I followed a toothpick I’d been floating down the snowmelt river along the curb to a slush dam reservoir some of us kids had built.

When I turned around, I was the only one there. All the other kids had gone back into the school. I never heard the bell.

On my way home from school one day, my mom had to come down to the lake in the car “to get me.” A schoolmate and I had stopped at the neighborhood party store to pick up plastic Army guys with fold-up parachutes you could throw up into the air and they would float back to earth.

At my grandma’s house, I would love to go outside to play around the big fenced-in yard in Palmer. I was too young to figure out my folks could hear the water for the outside spigot being turned on from inside the house.

“Johnny, get away from that hose!”

Springtime also meant, and still means, admiring the glorious beauty of the purple and white crocuses poking up through the snow. Then there were the chocolate bunnies, or cross-shaped cakes wrapped in plastic hidden like Easter eggs throughout our house – baskets with green plastic grass and malted milk ball eggs.

Birthday parties with kids from school. Those pictures today are wild to look at just for the fashions of the 1960s and haircuts alone. A lot of peace signs held up by my party-goers.

Those were the days when the barber my dad took me to handed out pens that had a flapping American flag on them with the slogan: “Beautify America, get a haircut.”

I’ve lost the Princeton-style haircut, the pen, birthday parties whenever possible and most of my 60’s-style clothes, but I’ve kept the music along with the peace sign, watching baseball and a bunch of memories of my dad.

Listen. It’s 1968. Can you hear the Zombies?

“It’s the time of the season for loving.”

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