

On the subject of...

A time for giving thanks by Viki Eggers Mason



THE TRUTH IN BLACK AND WHITE

The Aberdeen Advocate

I suspect that some folks who read the Advocate, and even those who refuse to read the Advocate, would be surprised to know that I do have a positive side. In truth, I'm an upbeat person who is constantly looking for the silver lining. All of this makes writing about the woes of our community a double-daunting chore. I don't dwell on the negative easily but, in this case, it must be done. I see it as a labor of love and so I struggle with it. The good news is, once a year or so I take an opportunity to celebrate the wonder around us. This year, as I take a long look around me I have many, many blessings and so here they are, in no particular order.

I have so many friends, family members and allies for whom I'm thankful. To list them here would be a grave disservice since sometimes just associating with me can lead to trouble. You know who you are and I hope you know just how much I depend upon your bright smiles and

strong shoulders. Your thoughtful comments and your prayers make the life of this crusader that much better. I love you all.

Since I moved here six years ago I've been generally disappointed in Mississippi autumns. It seems to me that the leaves hang around, get dry, tired and eventually fall off the trees sometime in December out of sheer boredom. This year, I'm enormously grateful for the few brisk mornings that have managed to bring about the magic of fall colors. It makes my eyes ache somehow - as if I want weep for the beauty of it.

I'm grateful for pansies. When I was a very little girl (before I moved to Montana where summer comes and goes in a few brief weeks) I was allowed to plant pansies in my grandmother's garden each spring. I loved their perky little faces then as I love them now, for the quiet way they bloom in big, bright colors and never seem to run out of cheer.

I'm glad they live in Mississippi and bloom on through what you folks call winter. They make me smile.

I continue to be delighted by the morning rituals of Aberdeen's own Trashy Ladies. These women suit up each morning and take to the streets in search of dastardly deeds to undo. Every time I see them marching down the road in their quest for rubbish, I grin from ear to ear. Here are truly selfless women whose mission, like mine, is a labor of love. Thank you for caring about the litter careless people leave behind them, ladies, and thank you for the many moments of pride in our little village you make possible for me. You inspire me.

I'm grateful for those who protect and serve. Our police officers, our firefighters, even our electric linemen wake up every morning never knowing if this will be the day they shall sacrifice their very lives in the line of duty. They are

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A stellar career in the educational arena?

By Contributing Editor Don Rowe

Being more or less the modest type, I realized a long time ago it wouldn't be in my best interest to be so bold as to announce to the world that my life or my career was exceptional in any way, shape, form or fashion. I also learned if I didn't "toot my own horn" so to speak, I wouldn't have to deal with various critics who would, for the sake of argument, take issue with what little I have accomplished during the course of my lifetime.

On the opposite side of the unpretentiousness coin is what is

known as "egotism," defined as "the motivation to maintain and enhance favorable views of self." The word is derived from the Latin word "ego" (self or I), combined with the English suffix "-ism" (philosophy). In more contemporary terms, however, egotism could be described as "the art of seeing in yourself what others cannot see" or, to put it more bluntly, "nature's compensation for mediocrity."

The term "egotism,"

struck a chord recently in a couple of newspaper articles detailing the upcoming retirement of Aberdeen school superintendent Lavon Fluker-Reed in which she described her 34-plus years "in the educational arena" as a "stellar career."

Not privy to all the details of Reed's 20-plus year tenure as a special education instructor, curriculum assistant and elementary school principal in Meridian, I am not in a position

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under paid and altogether under-valued but still they serve us. I'm even more grateful for the sweethearts, the wives and the children of these men and women because they quietly bear the burden of fear and uncertainty without complaint. (Ok. Maybe they complain, but never to me.) Thank you all and may God bless you for your service to us in-grates.

I thank God for former Vice President Al Gore. Mr. Gore is living, breathing proof that everything and everyone in God's creation, no matter how worthless they may appear to be on the surface, has a purpose to serve. Had not the former vice president invented the internet, I would never have met my handsome husband nor would you be reading these words! You see, Tipper? Your years of sacrifice are rewarded every day in many ways here in Aberdeen, Mississippi. Thank you.

It has happened twice that a certain local preacher whose name I do not know marched into my office to announce that God loves me and will bless me for my courage and tenacity in dealing with the seedy side of local government. On both occasions, his appearance coincided with an uncharacteristic sagging of my spirit that other people might call despair. (I call it a 'blue funk.') His visits provide encouragement and peace at precisely the right moment in an amazingly unexpected way. It's like discovering a Baskin Robbins ice-cream cake in the freezer when you're looking for a midnight snack. Bless you, mystery minister!

I'm grateful for alderman Brunson Odom. I don't always agree with Brunson, nor do I always like the decisions he inflicts upon me, (like Willie Cook's continuing tenure on the board and that pesky smoking ban.) but, with Brunson, I can rest assured that what comes out of his mouth is as close to the

truth as he can tell me. Brunson doesn't shy away from telling it like it is, and that, in case you hadn't already figured out, is a quality I hold in great esteem. May you and your family reap the benefits of your honest service, Brunson.



There are people and groups in Aberdeen who go to war every day against neglect and ignorance and I include them in my prayers each day a few examples follow:

The Friends of the Aberdeen Animal Shelter took on the ambitious task of building a facility to hold and care for Aberdeen's homeless pets. They found funding, elbow grease, and committed individuals to move them toward their goal and, this year, neglected animals have a warm, safe, kinder life because of the efforts of these gentle neighbors. You know, I think, how much I value your service and how thankful I am that you happened along.

Each year the organization called "Ten Men" rustles up money to send deserving youngsters to college. Nobody asks the men to take on this monumental challenge. They do it out of the goodness of their hearts in the spirit of service to their fellow man. I'm humbled to know that I live among people like these. (Here it should also be said that Ralph Saxton, who happens to be one of the Ten Men, has also found another "Easter egg" in his discovery of Barea College. This Kentucky college offers *free tuition* to promising young people who cannot otherwise afford it – as a matter of fact, if you CAN afford to attend, you will not be admitted. Ralph is lately busy seeking likely candidates who qualify to benefit by the Barea experience. If you know a deserving youngster of little means, please call Ralph at 369-9385.) Can there be bigger blessings than these?

Of course, there is the Comma Coach. Our friend and contributor to *The Aberdeen Advocate*, Don Rowe has been an amazing blessing! I found him at the carwash one day wandering around picking up change. (This is just one of his quirky habits that does not involve

correcting newspaper copy with red pens.) Since that first meeting I've come to proudly call him my friend. For no apparent reason he has dedicated himself to this publication and has, like me, no excuse at all for doing such except his stubborn conviction that Aberdeen deserves the best of everything from government to schools to newspapers. It is not possible for me to tell him how helpful he has been because, if I did, he'd want another raise and it's only been a few months since I doubled his wages. As I calculate it, he now gets paid six figures. (Sadly, all those figures are zeros.)

Lest you think life with your own comma coach is easy, let me assure you there IS a down side. When Coach started removing unnecessary commas and periods from my stories, I decided to keep the extra “,s” and “.s” stored in hermetically sealed mayonnaise jars under my desk. Recently, I've begun to suspect the seals have been tampered with. Just last week I went looking for a comma and, instead, found a small “:” and a noisy little “;” in the mix.

So, when a person's punctuation marks start interbreeding, does she become para-gram?

May God bless you, dear reader friends and may your holidays be full of unspeakable joy.

Your Municipal Employees

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Bud

When I count my blessings,

I count you twice!

Thank you for being...

A stellar career in the educational arena?

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to make a judgment as to whether or not her career there could be termed "stellar."

Her overall 34-year career, of course, would include her 12 ½-year stint at the head of the Aberdeen school system and it is here I can point to a sizeable portion of the local populace, me included, who would take issue with her "stellar career" claim.

In both the *Aberdeen Examiner* and the *Columbus Dispatch* articles, Reed justifiably points with pride to what she sees as her accomplishments as superintendent here in Aberdeen: the Air Force Junior ROTC program, Tech Discovery, KidZone at Belle Elementary, among others.

However, like most of us would do in the same situation, Reed neglected to reflect upon any of her many failures during her 12-plus years at the helm of what used to be one of North Mississippi's most respected school districts. With all due apologies to Bill O'Reilly, instead of leaving us with a fair and balanced picture of her controversial reign as school superintendent, Reed chose to use the euphemism "regrets" to describe her failures and, according to the *Examiner* article, she claimed "her accomplishments far outweigh her regrets." (Again, the majority of the knowledgeable residents of the school district would dispute that claim also.)

Then, in a statement which almost knocked me off my chair, Reed claimed in fact she had only one *regret*: "The only regret I have is that under my leadership we did not make Level 5." (Uncharacteristically, Reed was up front with the last portion of that statement.) The *Examiner* article goes on to state the district had mostly been ranked at Level 3 and Level 4. "That's a good ac-

complishment as far as academic achievement," Reed was quoted as saying.

Never one to let reality stand in her way, Reed failed to share the fact that in the past five years, Aberdeen's various schools have "achieved" a Level 3 (successful) status on 19 different occasions. (Remember, too, that a Level 3 successful rating is equivalent to nothing more than an average school whose students reached their growth expectations or failed to make enough progress but had mid-level test scores.) This past year, 313 of the state's 842 (37%) public schools were ranked as Level 3 schools.

During that same span of time, Aberdeen schools reached Level 4 (exemplary) status only three times, while three other Aberdeen schools were rated at Level 2 (under-performing). On a percentage basis, that means that over the past five years Aberdeen's schools were successful (average) 76% of the time, below average (under-performing) 12% and above average (exemplary) 12%. Combine the first two figures and you'll find our schools have been at or below the median 88% of the time.

This past year, over 50% of the state's schools were rated either a Level 5 superior-performing (207 – 25%) or a Level 4 exemplary (215 – 26%). With none of the Aberdeen schools rated a Level 5 and just Belle Elementary ranked a Level 4, that means the remainder of Aberdeen's schools fell into the bottom half of the state's 842 public schools.

Adding insult to injury, there were only 96 Level 2 under-performing schools in the entire state last year and Aberdeen High School, once the town's pride and joy, was one of the lowest 12% because it failed to adequately progress and had low test scores. So in reality, what Reed claims to be "a good accomplishment as far as academic achievement" actually instead

reeks of mediocrity more times than not.

A much better example of "a good accomplishment as far as academic achievement" is concerned can be found right here in Monroe County. Although neither Amory nor the various county schools are listed in the Top 10 rankings statewide, the number of Level 5 and Level 4 schools is indeed impressive and they far outnumber the Level 3 schools.

For example, Amory Middle School has been a Level 5 for five consecutive years and Amory Elementary School has been a Level 4 school each of those same years. Amory High School, meanwhile, dropped (by the slimmest of margins) to a Level 3 school this past year after four straight Level 4 rankings. For those of you keeping score, that totals out to five Level 5s, nine Level 4s and only one Level 3.

Hamilton's, Hatley's and Smithville's schools are almost as impressive. Hamilton has been rated a Level 4 four times and a Level 3 once over the past five years, while Hatley has five consecutive years as a Level 4 school. Smithville's record is even more impressive, with two Level 5s and three Level 4s. Again, for those keeping count, that's two Level 5s, an even dozen Level 4s and just one Level 3.

And that brings me to an old saying which states, "liars figure and figures lie." So, do Reed's statements concerning her belief that her schools' Level 3 and Level 4 achievements are "a good accomplishment as far as academic achievement" is concerned make her an outright liar? Probably not, because she really didn't tell a ball-faced lie. But her statements do remind me of a statistician who deep, down in his heart believes figures don't lie. What he won't admit, however, is that under analysis some of those figures won't stand up, either.

We get letters...Imagine that!!

Dear Viki

I was recently pointed in your direction by a coworker from Monroe County. I read the current and previous "*Advocate*" and love your writing style and message.

I am a resident of Clay County, 30 years old and just registered to vote prior to this last election. I am not sure why I didn't register to vote prior but since I did; I now have been fascinated and intrigued with politics and looking to get more actively involved. Like you I tend to have more

conservative views and would say I guess I could be considered an "R."

I don't think there was one Republican candidate who ran in any of the local county elections. We had a few independents but it was majority ALL Democratic candidates. Now most of these so-called Democratic candidates, I personally feel have a conservative view on a lot of issues but run as Democrats to appease the certain groups of individuals. I think that main reason minorities and younger votes tend to vote democrat is because they are misinformed. (*Amen!*)

Not to say that all democrats candidates or officials are bad choices.

I am in the process of starting up a non-partisan non-profit business that would be primary informational letting people know about voting and how government works. Maybe we can work together in the future? Meanwhile, I will continue to look forward to reading "*The Advocate*".

Troy M. Waldrep - Clay County

(YAY, TROY! Keep up the good work and let me know if/how I can help! VEM)



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The Aberdeen Advocate is committed to the goal of improving the quality of life in Aberdeen and Monroe County by identifying and exposing waste and mismanagement in Government. To these ends we humbly offer our observations and opinions.

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"The secret to happiness is not having everything you want. The secret to happiness is wanting everything you have."

...Chinese proverb