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The promise of promise is hard to keep

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—February is tricking itself out as a month full of promise.

I've seen robins and vultures this week—both signs of spring. Canada geese honked overhead this morning, heading north. I honked back, but I was not invited to join the flock. I think this started in junior high.

With warm days and cold nights, sap rises and the maples run. Highland County's sugar houses are boiling off 40 gallons of "water" to get one gallon of syrup.

My writing ratio is about three unneeded words for every keeper. I may be more efficient than our local syrup producers, but one gallon of their stuff is worth a thousand words of mine. Maybe 10,000.

Around Blue Grass, February is the month that normally comes in like an iceberg and goes out like one, too. I'm not raising my hopes for the sultry 30s just yet. I've shoveled too many two-foot-deep snows in March...and even April.

When I first introduced my about-to-be wife, Melissa, to the farm we were going to buy almost 30 years ago, snow was falling on leafed-out maples.

"It's spitting snow," she said between justifiable shivers.

"Those are white apple-blossom petals from the orchard," I said untruthfully.

"IT'S THE SECOND WEEK OF MAY!"

"Precipitation is good for cattle pasture," I said agriculturally.

"North Carolinians from Charlotte, like me, are bred for sweating, not freezing. This can't be Virginia. You've hijacked me to Alaska!"

"This is faux snow," I said deceitfully.

"I'll faux you! MOMMA. HELP! He's just like you said he'd be."

"It is what it is," I said, turning fact into phony philosophy.

"You, Mr. Polar Bear, are in deep faux snow," she said prophetically.

I hadn't told her that the mountain above our farm was named, "Snowy."

I'm skeptical of decent days in February. They always feel like a set up.

Genuine promise is as hard to handle as false promise. The promise of early talent can be a snare for our young if we expect more than is there. Many starts are promising, and just as many are disappointing. It's how things turn out that's important.

Unfulfilled promise is hard to watch, particularly when it's stymied or squandered.

I've always been envious of inherited talent, which is the prerequisite of promise. Whether it's exceptional intelligence or the ability to run fast, singular talent is a gift. It's neither earned nor acquired.

When I was a kid in Pittsburgh, I once saw a teenager throw so hard in Pony League that I could barely follow the ball from mound to plate. Sam McDowell became a big-league, strike-out pitcher for Cleveland at 19. It was said that he was faster than Koufax. About himself, he said: "I was the

biggest, most hopeless and most violent drunk in baseball.”

So much promise. Except for some amazing strikeout stats, he was just a so-so pitcher and done at 32. 141W-134L; 2,453 strikeouts. How great might he have been?

Out of baseball, Sam McDowell hit bottom, went into rehab and became an addiction counselor. Sober, he paid his money debts dollar for dollar and helped other players.

Promise, I think, should be honored, to see what might become of it.

Of course, that’s easy for me to say, someone without any special talent for anything in particular. Most of us spend our lives gunking around on ordinary things like piling up money, getting by or waving as we’re passing through.

Talent alone takes you to the point of not fulfilling promise. From there, it’s training, feedback, practice and a maniacal investment of time when you’re young that gives talent a shot at what it might be.

Professor K.Anders Ericsson at Florida State University researches expertise. He found that exceptional performance required at least 10,000 hours of background investment, an idea popularized by Malcolm Gladwell as the “10,000-Hour Rule” in *Outliers*.

Exceptional talent plus 10,000 hours—and you might, just might, get to the top. That’s actually not much time, and it probably brings talent to the point where you know whether you’re going to stay good or be exceptional.

Great, however, doesn’t happen unless you are sufficiently selfish and self-centered. The gift always comes first--before spouses and kids. Picasso was a genius, but a lousy husband and a crummy dad.

Very few reach the top. The U.S. Army used to be satisfied with people being all they could be. That’s still good enough for me.

False promise of February’s kind is just a see-through trick.

Unredeemed promise leaves the question unanswered.

But realized promise -- at whatever the level of talent -- is always worthy of applause.

While I hate February on principle, I promise not to write about this disagreeable month again...this year.

It is what it is, and we are who we are.

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