

2/1/2025

## Ob-la-di, ob-la-da

*John Friel*



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Once again This Space can't control its weakness for a good quote. Ergo, here come some zingers having to do with the year just past, i.e., the late unlamented 2024.

“Waiting on a hurricane is like being stalked by a turtle.”—Cheri Markowitz, Emerald Coast Growers.

Stroll for your life! It's a funny description of an un-funny situation. Hurricanes arrive slowly and then suddenly: Not here, not here, almost here and then OMG! The storms of 2024 were not kind to large areas in the South, e.g., western North Carolina.

This quote also reminded me of an old favorite: A priest, asked what it was like to hear the confessions of nuns, replied, “It's like being stoned to death—with popcorn.” It's a good metaphor for proofreading, especially nomenclature. It's always something, it's always something small and it's endless.

“Symbols are an underappreciated aspect of leadership.”—Thomas Friedman, pundit, op/ed columnist and most famously author of “The World Is Flat” and numerous other books. I've read a certain amount of his work and agreed with, well, some of it. He also, less admirably, wrote, “Give war a chance.” He wanted the U.S. to be free to be “as crazy as our enemies.” But the symbols line struck a chord.

Symbolism is indeed important. Perhaps the most effective thing leaders can do is set a tone, establish a theme to rally around. Religious leaders have always known this; politicians are the next biggest users, followed by business leaders and educators.

That Friedman mot came near the end of a piece on the late President Jimmy Carter, one of many good people we all lost last year. Whatever you thought about his achievements in office, I think it's inarguable that he was our best ex-President.

Believing that solar power would and should be a big part of our future, Carter installed solar panels on the White House roof to power water heaters. A pretty ho-hum thing to do now, but this was 1979. A small investment, but a sweeping gesture whose potential power was short-circuited when the subsequent administration quietly removed them.

Closer to home in the green industries—a field inextricably wedded to, identified with and dependent on solar energy—we said goodbye to Stanton Gill, Maryland Extension Agent for half a century, entomologist extraordinaire

and lecture circuit regular. In my 40-plus years in the industry, I'd known Stanton for probably 30—or thought I did until I attended his memorial service, which had to be divided into two sessions because literally hundreds came to pay their respects. I knew only four of the attendees, every one of whom had a Stanton story. The guy apparently never slept.

I knew Gill as a bug guy. But he was also a canoeist, rafter, surfer, drone operator, sculptor, farmer/orchard owner and practical joker. The comments at the service included these:

“A great intellect, passion and a high work ethic.”

“He was fearless. He encouraged us to move forward and try new things.”

“He made us a better institution, better educators, better people.”

“He was an endearing goofball.”

Too close to home: The latter half of 2024 was a fraught period in the immediate Friel world. My kin and I watched helplessly as too many people we cared about either passed away or experienced significant life-quality downgrades.

Jimmy Carter may or may not have been thinking of such times when he said, “You can do what you have to do and sometimes you can do it even better than you think you can.”

As I type, the moon here in PA is a bright blur in the western sky, with a doppelganger spreading like a glittering puddle on yesterday's snow. The world is beautiful. It's well that it's so cold; it reminds us that the world really doesn't care whether we think it's beautiful or ugly. But the former is the healthier default setting.

Which brings us to one final quote by Robert Frost: “In three words I can sum up everything I've learned about life: It goes on.” **GP**

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