

March: “In Like a Lion and Out Like a Lamb” Fact or Folklore?

The first few days of March brought with them snow, ice, and wind-chill temperatures that dipped down into the 20-below-zero range. Driveways had drifted over; some were blown shut.

March was roaring, and I was dreaming of green. My eyes ached for it. Would the month leave in a gentler way, lambish?

Spring’s official start was coming mid-month, but it hardly seemed possible. A whitened world was staring at me. Winter had grabbed hold of us, tightly, in a seasonal tug-of-war, and it left me wishful—wishful for my tulips to be lifted up in the lengthening light of longer days, just ahead, and for my windows to be opened wide during those first warming hours of April. I wanted to see wings! I was waiting on them—on butterflies to come again, and with them the hummingbirds and songbirds, my garden’s guests.

I missed so many voices—the robin’s and the bluebird’s and the oriole’s. My ears wanted to hear the sound of singing again, a whole forest filled with it. (Spring really knows how to make an entrance.)

A question was asked of me this past week: “Where did the words ‘in like a lion and out like a lamb’ originate?” Although the question seemed simple enough, finding an answer was complicated. Confusion show up, and quite quickly. My eyes followed a written-down trail of words and opinions through several centuries of time.

Naturalist John Ray’s book, *Catalogue of English Proverbs*, dated 1670, includes the words, and so does the *Ames Almanack*, a later publication from the 1700s.

The earliest written record though reaches back almost 400 years, to 1624, to a complex stage play, “Wife for a Month,” by playwright John Fletcher. His work includes a conversational exchange between two characters. One announces that he would come “in like a lion,” and another responds to him: “But you would go out like a lamb when you went to hanging.” Since the play examines human behavior—the best of our choices and the worst—the words seem to be, at least to me, more about human nature than Mother Nature. The month of March is referenced in the play. It is a moody month, sometimes unpredictable, as are we. We have our stormy sides—each of us, all of us.

My trail then led me back to the present day, to a planetarium, where I found the answer I was looking for. There I was, staring up at the night sky, eating a bag of astronaut food, actual astronaut food, Neapolitan ice cream, freeze-dried, and it was very good. (Stay tuned.)

My entire life had been lived in a place surrounded by farm fields. My own grandfather, Charlie, was among those who worked the land, so I thought the lion/lamb adage was about the weather. Grandpa plowed his acreage at a time when you only had an almanac, your eyes, and the world around you to predict what was about to happen. He was skilled in something called world watching. The habits of birds and animals were paid attention to because changes in them could warn you about a storm’s approach. A changing wind meant something too, and a changing sky. Watching led to wisdom—weather wisdom.

“Red sky in morning, take warning. Red sky at night, a delight.”

It was interesting to me as a youngster to have a Sunday School teacher read a lesson plan about the natural world that was taken from Matthew’s sixteenth chapter, verse 3: “When it is evening you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.’ And in the morning, ‘It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening.’ You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky...” Hmmm. “You know how to interpret.”

Nature observations have been a part of my everyday living, and I am not alone in having some of those sayings committed to memory. A few are listed below. There are many more.

If it rains before seven, it will stop before eleven.

When the wind is in the east, it’s good for neither man nor beast.

If a ring is formed around the moon, rain is coming really soon.

April showers bring May flowers.

If the grass is dry at night, look for rain before the light.

Winds from the east, fish bite the least. Winds from the west, fish bite the best.

When windows won't open and salt clogs the shaker, the weather will favor the umbrella maker.

I have never been a scoffer of the sing-song sayings my agricultural ancestors depended on, or of their folksy forecasting. More often than not, those sayings can be tied to science. They aren't quackery. Example: Salt holds moisture. Wood expands in high humidity. If the air is holding moisture, that moisture will be released in the form of rain.

Even Boy Scouts are trained in gathering observational insights. When I signed up to be a Boy Scout leader almost 30 years ago (moms were accepted), I picked up two instructional scouting books, and both books are still on my shelf: Robert Baden-Powell's 1908 edition of "Scouting for Boys," and the 1911 "Boy Scouts Handbook." These are reprinted editions. Anyone can purchase them. Some of the rhyming sayings above were recorded in those pages.

I like to re-read those books every few years. They are nature encyclopedias, and they remind me how much there is to learn from the land. It's a classroom without walls, and the teachers are all around. *Look! Listen!*

(Note: Some of the information in the scouting books will need to be filtered through the understanding that a century's worth of history has passed.)

Chief Luther Standing Bear, a Native American educator and philosopher who taught in the late 1800s and early 1900s, wrote: "Knowledge was inherent in all things. The world was a library."

A "library." For learning. A *living* library. His people had a deep awareness, and a reverence, for the natural world—for plants, for animals, for the sky.

And it was in the sky that I found my answer—at that planetarium—while munching on my snack from outer space, astronaut ice cream, four dollar's worth, purchased in the gift shop.

Two constellations, Leo the Lion and Aries the Ram (father of a lamb), were stretched out across a massive screen, six stories in height, there above me. I was staring at a simulated version of the night sky projected onto that screen—so many stars. Twinkle, twinkle.

Suddenly, I was among those who believed that the saying dated back to earth's earliest civilizations—to the sky-watchers of the ancient world—and to their constellations.

What I learned was this: If you stand outside on March 1st at 8:00 p.m., you will see the constellation of Leo the Lion overhead, rising in the sky, "coming in" headfirst along the eastern horizon. Leo is very findable. If you can locate the Big Dipper, you can locate the lion. He travels westward across the sky; all of the constellations do. Leo's stars include lights of varying colors—a white star, a blueish-white one, a yellow, and a red. Red stars are not the hottest stars; they are cooler than all other stars except brown ones. Some of Leo's stars are actually star groupings. Multiple stars are clustered together into what appears to be one light.

After finding Leo, look in the opposite direction toward the western horizon. Aries will look as if it will soon be setting, "going out."

Next, repeat your observations at the exact same time on March 31st. Where do you see the lion? It will have moved because our earth is always turning. The stars stay still and steady; we earthlings are the ones on the move. Our planet spins at a speed of 1,000 miles per hour. Stars look different at various times during each night, as well as different from night to night, and month to month.

Leo, on March 31st, will be positioned higher in the sky, raised above the horizon. The lamb, though, will be visible only briefly, right at twilight, and then completely gone, quite fast. The month of March goes out when the lamb leaves the sky with it.

Those animals were my answer.

If you believe the words are about the weather, then the words can be reversed: "In like a lion, out like a lamb. In like a lamb, out like a lion." No reversal is possible with the constellation theory.

Because no reversal was possible for me, I could no longer expect lamb-like weather at the end of March, as I had hoped. Suddenly my tulips seemed even further away than they actually were.

Winter rattled my windows; they were shivering. It looked cold outside. It *sounded* cold.

I needed to remind myself that winter's snowy months were nearly behind us. Nature's resurrection was just ahead. It wouldn't be long now. Green would spring forth. Life, the conqueror, would come.

I must wait.

And while I do, my imagination will keep me company. I will light a lilac candle and pretend my own lilac bushes are in full bloom, scenting a springtime breeze, the lilacs here by my back porch.

I will watch for migrating birds to arrive while I listen to a CD-recording of songbirds in the wild. Many of our migrators travel over long, long distances and have already left on their journeys northward. They are headed home.

I will open a book of Emily Dickinson's poetry. Her writings are fine reading on those winter evenings when a person is dreaming of warmer days.

Miss Dickinson called nature's first-to-bloom plants the "beautiful children of spring" and wrote about "smiling May" being "crowned with flowers."

She loved birds, dearly. They were her "angels." Robins, her most favorite of all (she singled them out), were her "Gabriels."

It was my brother, Joel, who introduced me to Miss Emily. He left for college nearly three decades ago and came back on his first break with a gift for me, a book of poems, Emily's. "Here," he said. "I think you are going to like this." He was right. Her poetry, to me, is calming: "The wind began to rock the grass."

Maybe I will listen to something quiet as I read. Laura Sullivan's piece, "Morning in the Meadow," I love it. Or Stanton Lanier's "Awaken the Dawn," equally pleasing. Or Robin Spielberg's "Circle of Life." All of them are soothing. So says my soul. Sometimes I need to create the spring I cannot find, and that just has to do.

It's comforting for me to know that Emily was as impatient as I am when she was waiting to be with her own garden. She wrote: "I have made a permanent rainbow by filling my window with hyacinths." Those blooming hyacinths, several colors of them, were planted in pots beside her bedroom window. When a garden could not survive outside, she planted one within. She colored her snowy days with those petals.

As can we. Authoress Emily can inspire each of us to become a gardener, even if we don't own an inch of earth.

Do you remember how we grew a daisy in a Dixie cup for our Mother's Day gift back in kindergarten? We caused a flower to appear, and then a smile.

Blessings on your every effort, dear reader, to make this world we share a more beautiful place.

"Finding a way to live the simple life today is man's most complicated task."

Henry Courtney