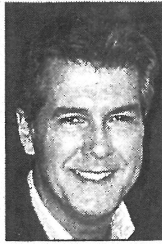


Morning paper: Digest news of the day minus distractions



The older I get the earlier I awake. If the trend continues, I'll be rising at 4 a.m., eating supper in mid-afternoon and hitting the hay at 8 in the evening. The jokes about senior citizens' early bird dinner specials take on a different, more practical meaning to me.

"You know," I said to my wife, Yolanda, one morning over the newspaper, "and I'm not sayin' we'll ever do it, but eating early kinda makes sense if you're startin' the day before dawn. I mean, think about the pioneers, Ben Franklin, early to bed, early to rise ... all that jazz."

"Aye, vato," she says, slipping into Spanish when aggravated, "we're not eating before five and you're staying awake with me until ten to watch the news. I'm not ready to live with an old man."

Sometimes, around 9:30, I'll nudge her awake, both of us asleep on the couch and we'll stumble upstairs to bed. With the hard-earned judgment of a man married for over 20 years, I make no comment about living with an "old woman."

As for rising early, Ben Franklin was correct regarding the pluses. I can write, check email, and take a

soul-centering run through my slumbering small town.

But it also gives me time to read the morning paper while drinking a cup of steaming coffee, two practices which Ben would approve. The solitary act of reading the newspaper gives me the chance to consider the news of the day at my pace with no carnival barking announcers, flashing "ALERTS," or gold commercials touting the end of the world. Apparently a lock box filled with precious metal makes economic Armageddon palatable.

A newspaper has none of these distractions. We are in control of the process, interacting with a newspaper in ways we do not with other media. We read what we choose, lingering over an article or ad that catches our attention — no intrusive pop-ups — scanning past those that do not. We separate the thin pages with our fingertips, smell the "fresh off the press" scent, hear the snap, crackle, pop as we crisply fold it to the shape we desire.

Of course, not everyone has time to read the paper in the morning or has delivery available, but, as an addict, I find ways to get my fix. When I lived in downtown Chicago and rode the El to work I purchased the Chicago Sun-Times at a newspaper stand. I chose the Sun-Times not because I thought

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it was a better paper than the Tribune, but for its tabloid design which made it easier to read on a crowded train.

When Yolanda and I lived in Dallas and drove to work, dropping the kids off at day care along the way, there was no time to read the Dallas Morning News. Busy with two toddlers we never woke up earlier than necessary. So I read the paper on my lunch break as I munched a sandwich.

Most people have an order in which they read a paper. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren famously said: "I always turn to the sports page first, which records people's accomplishments. The front page has nothing but man's failures."

As a sports fan, and a person who grows weary of an increasingly dysfunctional world, I enjoy the sports page as well. The Champaign-Urbana based News-Gazette, our daily, has one of the best. But I save sports for last. First, because for me, like Earl Warren, it is the most entertaining and satisfying section so I savor it like dessert. Second, and more practically, Yolanda and I share a love of the morning paper.

Since I awake about an hour before her, there is usually no conflict. But remember, I've been happily married for over 20 years. That's no accident. To preserve early morning peace I read the hard news, editorial and local sections before she comes downstairs. These are Yolanda's favorites and she pours over them like she's preparing for the bar exam, mumbling in Spanish when she disagrees with a point of view offered in a column or editorial.

I also scan the obituaries for those that pique my curiosity. Some may think this macabre, but for me the obits highlight an individual's accomplishments. They provide insight into the deceased's life by recording lineage, loves and passions. When an individual has lived a long and productive life the list of parents, spouse, children, siblings and friends go on for paragraphs followed by the

place of birth and a recounting of a life well-lived.

Even in the tragedy of a life cut short, there is a line or two about the individual's love of family, friends, music, reading, model trains, doll houses, school or any number of passions. These obits teach us that the joy we bring to those who know us is not in direct proportion to the time spent together. You certainly will not learn such lessons by listening to the clipped obits on the radio, which state the date of death and the burial time.

No, it is the newspaper which gives us the breadth and depth of coverage we need to digest local, national and international events. From coverage of church bake sales to the machinations of an international economy, from high school softball scores to the Olympics, from the death of a fellow you knew as Frederick, but his friends called "Spud," the newspaper covers it all.

Most importantly, for an "old man" like me, I don't have to stay up until 10 to learn about it all.

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