

# COMMENTARY

## Rest in peace



In the interest of being prepared for the incomparable, not to mention the inpreparable, it's time to think about obituaries.

Yes, Miss Musgrove (the late Miss Musgrove was my tyrannical but peerless high school English teacher), I know it's not a word. But I like it anyway and everybody understands what it means — *inpreparable*.

A great obituary should be short and sweet, fueled either by facts or fancy, and written with or without real words.

Let me explain why I'm doing this: First, because I love obituaries. There is almost nothing as fascinating as reading the entire and very abridged history of a single life, one not deemed important enough by fancy-schmancy biographers with university seats to spend 500 pages describing.

Even a lengthy obituary in the daily newspaper usually takes about as long to read as a small match takes to burn out. And a short obit is nothing but a match strike: *Tssssiiiiipp*.

It's just not fair that the long obituary, aka the biography, is revered as a historic and scholarly art form. But a short one, known rather transparently as "an obituary," is shuffled to the back

of a newspaper section like a poor felonious cousin who gets relegated to the back of the family album. (*Who, him? He's your cousin George, and he's certainly not from my side of the family, heaven forbid. He was found in New Orleans shot through the heart in a house of ill repute by his fourth wife, La Belle Mordetta Vendetta, the Parisian Countess.*)

Second, I'm doing this because there has been a great deal of talk lately about the decline of the American newspaper as we know it, most of it completely wrong.

As an old newspaperman (with an emphasis on old, not newspaper), I can tell you that the reasons given by corporate spokespeople for cutting newspaper staffs or reducing salaries, or for euthanizing a paper, are patently false.

Right off the bat when a paper goes down or its captains lay off reporters who served as watchdogs of arrogant and sometimes unscrupulous officialdom, the managers or owners pick from a very short list of excuses.

Either they claim it's that mean old electronic bully-boy, the World-Wide-Web, or they blame the recession and failed ad revenues, while simultaneously implying but never outwardly stating that human beings may have just taken an evolutionary step forward. (And some Americans are actually human beings, ones who can, believe it or not, read and think without having to be patronized.)

According to the implicit logic of this nonsense, the more highly evolved species, to be known henceforth as *homo webiens*, simply will not advertise in a newspaper, or deign to dirty their hands by holding one up and turning its pages.

There is an obvious reason for this, if it is true, but it is not the reason we've been hearing about lately.

Here's why the dailies are failing: lack of imagination on the part of managers. In short, they put the good death in back, and try to hide it with stories about bad death, or stories that are worse than death, up front.

I don't have to explain that. Just look at the front page of a daily.

Obituaries are not about murder and mayhem, about tragic accidents or vast sieges of nature, about fate, chance, kings or desperate men (as John Donne said), even though those horsemen often establish the *raison d'être* of an obit. Instead, they're about Glorious Little Life Stories, or GLLSs.

Try reading them sometime. Don't let your spouse or your parents see you — and for God's sake, don't let your children spot you paging eagerly through printed lists of the recently deceased. That's bad form. But just open the paper and plunge in.

You won't be able to remember a time when you've had so much fun in so short a period, during daylight hours. (But if you can remember such a time, then it's a glorious life story, and you should consider putting it in your own obit.)

Obituaries are essentially social scenes, which everybody looks at. In these social scenes, all the participants

— the philanthropists, the party crowd, the church members, the heroes, the bums, the captains of industry, the peasants, the people from Cleveland, the good moms and good dads and good grandmothers and good granddads, the members of Rotary, the boaters and sportsmen and teachers and doctors and lawyers and cops and firefighters and account executives and retirees and young folks and old folks, the uncomplaining and complaining alike — have all stopped breathing.

People love these social scenes, and therefore advertisers will love them, especially if they're well written and they aren't hidden in the back. Such stories mark our course from start to finish, they reflect the best kind of reporting — well, second best, behind busting corrupt officials, whose stories you don't need in the front of the paper anyway since people will always find them and read them and go vote, including *homo webiens*, even though they're often worse than death.

Obituaries are reports sent back from the frontier of very permanent conclusions, and we readers want to know about that, because that's where we're going — to glory, if you will (except for corrupt officials), which is why I call these Glorious Little Life Stories.

If corporate managers of daily newspapers want to defy recessions and *homo webians* alike, they should start by repackaging their obits and putting them up front. The other stuff should go in back, with the bad cousins.

Do that, and pretty soon their pages will be groaning with advertising. And then we can all rest in peace. ■



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