

# ADDISON COUNTY INDEPENDENT

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## Reading Obituaries: A Stage of Life

It sneaks up on you.

I have always read the obituaries, but *selectively* - when there were about someone I knew or someone famous. People die, I thought: life's cycles. People get old, and they die. That's life. When people die young, "too early" we say, it's newsworthy and tragic.

The obit tells a narrative in short form – first act, second act, final act. He had a good, a full life, we often say. Living well is the best revenge for the uncertainty of the afterlife. Live with passion, die with dignity. We rationalize loss in these ways, with these clichés.

I don't mean I was cavalier. I haven't taken life for granted. I was young for a long time. I always appreciated life's mystery, recognized death's immanence, and made sure to enjoy the privilege of breathing

When one gets older oneself, well, things change. I used to think when I retired from full-time work I would see the world, go to faraway places. Or I'd put a mattress in the back of a little pick-up truck and explore parts of America that have long appealed to my imagination.

Now I think, when I retire, I'll explore Cornwall further, and Weybridge - maybe Orwell, if I get really daring.

These days, I always pause at the obits in the newspaper. If I don't read them right off the bat, it's close. I always read them. In my life now, as Hemingway said, "people are dying who never died before."

Reading the obits – it's a stage of life, and I've arrived at that point. I get to the obits in the *Independent*, and I stop, and read every word. I read about the work of the person who died, and about their passions, and their families. I read about

who “predeceased” them and who “survives” them. I realize the person who wrote the obit, summarizing a life, probably loved the person who died, and I admire their effort and restraint, under the circumstances.

In the *Independent* obits, I know a reasonable percentage of those whose lives are recognized. I also read the obits in the *Free Press* and *Boston Globe*, other newspapers I read daily. I don’t know these people, but it doesn’t matter. Their lives interest me, in a way they didn’t used to.

My Uncle Jack, the father of my five cousins who lived next door, used to read the morning and evening newspapers and cut out the obits. He sold memorials, granite headstones, “Jack Finn Memorials,” and these deaths represented opportunity to him. I found it strange.

I used to think it was creepy when I learned that big newspapers, the *New York Times*, et al., wrote obits of famous people while they were still alive. I knew it was practical – when these notables died, the paper was prepared. Still, it struck me as cold and premature.

But now I read the obits, closely. Near the end of these short essays, those who have died direct us where to send financial remembrances. Often it’s to the hospice workers who made sure their last days were not without human comfort and compassion. These people are the saints of our last days. They live, surrounded by death.

Sometimes it’s the Cancer Society, so that our funds, meager as they may be, can lead in some drop-in-the-bucket way to a far-off cure which won’t benefit them, it’s too late, but maybe others. That request is a gesture, I think, of genuine humility.

Sometimes we are asked to contribute to a church or charity. The obit never says “in lieu of flowers, send donations to the Me-First Society.” People who die want those who live to live better. They wish us, their survivors, well. There’s nothing in it for them. They love us anyhow, beyond their days.

Not long ago, I was having breakfast by myself at the Bagel Bakery, and I was sitting in a booth next to a guy I knew, but not well - we had been opponents on teams in the Middlebury Rec Basketball League in its 1980s heyday.

He was writing in a notebook, quite intent, so when I got up I greeted him with a mild wisecrack, “Workin’ on your memoirs,” I asked.

Not mine,” he responded. “Just collecting my thoughts. I have to speak at my Dad’s funeral today.”

I muttered, “Oh, I’m sorry,”

He said, "That's okay," he said. "He was old and has been sick for a long time."  
Then he added the line that has stayed with me, "That doesn't mean I'm not  
going to miss him."

Reading the obits, these lives in capsules, have become irresistible. Stage of life.