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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

An Obituary Writer Writes One for Himself

Summing up other people's lives has given me a sense of what I want to say—and why it's important to say it now



When I sum up other people's lives, I am not writing tributes. I must do the same for my own story. PHOTO: KRISTIAN THACKER FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By James R. Hagerty

April 19, 2019 10:19 a.m. ET

In a typical week, I write three or four obituaries for The Wall Street Journal. Now, in my spare time, I'm working on one that is trickier than usual: My own.

Where to begin? Maybe at the beginning: "My mother gave birth to me around noon on a cool and rainy summer day, July 30, 1956, in Minneapolis. Then she smoked a cigarette."

If my editors don't like that intro, that's fine. I'm not writing for publication. I'm writing only for those few friends and family members who may one day care to know more about my life. I don't want what many people seem to consider the standard form for obituaries: A list of names, dates and achievements interspersed with quotes about my nobility, generosity and

devotion to family. There will be no speculation about whether I have gone on to an eternal reward.

Instead, I will attempt to answer the three things I try to convey when writing someone else's obituary: What was he trying to do? Why? And how did it work out?

It isn't that I expect to die imminently. By writing my own obituary, I'm simply practicing what I preach: Write your own story while you can. Don't leave it to family members, who are almost certain to make a hash of it.

Surely I am the only person who remembers that my journalism career began at age 5, when I founded a short-lived, handwritten newspaper called Worm Killers (though even I can't recall why I chose that name). No one else could tell you how many monasteries I visited when I (much later) wrote a story about Trappist beers in Belgium. (Five.)

When I write obituaries for this newspaper, family members are almost always eager to talk about their loved one. Many seem to find it therapeutic. Yet some struggle to answer basic questions. Did she have a middle name? Did he graduate from college? What did he study? What did her parents do for a living?

More important, many have no idea why their father or mother chose one path in life over another. My children, should they care, will know.

They may wonder how I got my name(s), for instance. My parents christened me James Robert Hagerty. The James honored my paternal grandfather. The Robert was for my dad's brother, who died in World War II. What my parents always called me, though, was Bob. At some point, in a frivolous attempt to sound like a serious writer, I decided my byline should be James R. Hagerty. Now friends call me Bob, smart alecks call me Jim Bob, and other people don't know what to call me. Moral of the story: Name the kid what you intend to call the kid.

As a writer of obituaries, I like to know about people's early jobs, those first steps into adult responsibilities. I've written about successful people who started out fixing radios, parking cars, selling college-lecture notes or performing magic tricks.

For myself, I will mention my brief career at Kmart, where I was assigned to assemble bicycles one day and then left unsupervised. Though I had no skill at mechanics, I did my best to figure it out. When the first bicycle seemed complete, there were still several parts left over whose purpose and place eluded me. I threw them in the trash.

I'll be sure to write about my few triumphs, such as when, at age 18, I was hired to take publicity photos for a stripper and ended up winning first prize in the local camera club's monthly contest. But my mistakes may be more interesting and instructive.

So I will try to explain why I wrote a worst-selling book on the history of the mortgage company Fannie Mae, while many of my journalistic colleagues found topics of greater interest to the mass market. Perhaps I will confide that my approach to life was to go with the flow and take the opportunities that presented themselves, rather than make a strategic plan.

Those of us whose deaths will not be front-page news may wonder why we should bother writing down our stories. Who will care? The answer is that we don't know. It's quite possible no one will ever read my story. I'm not worried about that. If nothing else, I find it interesting to revisit my misadventures and try to figure out what they meant. Another motivation for me is that I wish my father, who died in 1997, had left me more clues about his life.



The author's father, Jack Hagerty, in the 1940s. PHOTO: THE HAGERTY FAMILY

Once you resolve to write your own obit, how do you get the job done? My advice is to set aside 15 to 30 minutes once or twice a week until you finish. Don't fuss about literary flourishes. Just write the story simply, in your own voice. As for structure, I'm going with chronological order. It may not show much imagination, but it provides a clear path for the writer and the reader.

When I sum up other people's lives, I am not writing tributes. I aim to include the ups and downs, the triumphs and errors, even the humiliations. I must do the same for my own story. But how many of my embarrassing mistakes, lapses and weaknesses should I record? And which ones? I'm still struggling with that part.

So what was I trying to do with my life? From an early age, I wanted to write for a newspaper. Why? I went with the flow. My parents were both journalists—my mother still is, at age 92—and I discovered early on that I had more aptitude for writing than, say, bicycle assembly.

And how did it work out? Pretty well, on the whole. Journalism has allowed me to live in New York, Hong Kong, Paris, London, Brussels, Atlanta and now Pittsburgh. If you count my brief editorship of *Worm Killers*, I've been at it for 57 years. I still haven't come up with a better plan.

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